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I LOVE LUCIFER  
By William P. McGivern

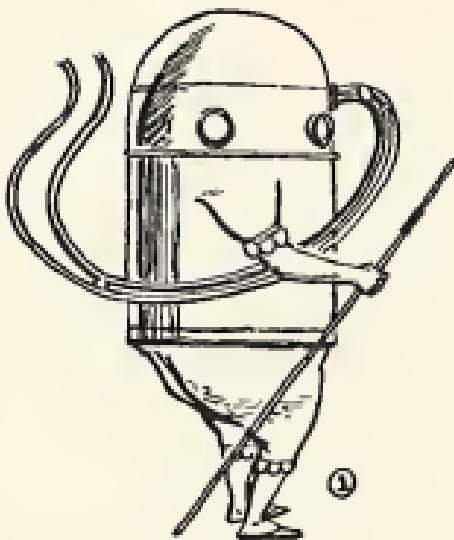
# AMAZING



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# ERNEST SCHROEDER

## *a portfolio*



*Time and Progress are synonymous. Each man feels his era to be far more advanced than that of his father. It is surprising, therefore, to find such basic similarity between the first models of Man-kind's great inventions, and the models in use today. The Kitty Hawk airplane was crude indeed by present standards, but, ten thousand years from now, it will still be recognizable for what it was—a flying machine. On page 70, you will find a portfolio of Man's first inventive efforts in many directions. How many can you identify?*

# AMAZING

STORIES

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## CONTENTS

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<b>I LOVE LUCIFER</b>	By William P. McGivern.....	4
<b>ONE WAY STREET</b>	By Jerome Bixby.....	22
<b>THE WEAPON</b>	By T. D. Hamm.....	40
<b>MILLION DOLLAR MAYBE</b>	By Evan Hunter.....	42
<b>THE BUILDER</b>	By Philip K. Dick.....	58
<b>THE PIN</b>	By Robert Bloch.....	74
<b>EDDIE FOR SHORT</b>	By Wallace West.....	88
<b>STAR CHILD</b>	By Bill Peters.....	101
<b>THE PERFECT WOMAN</b>	By Robert Shckley.....	118
<b>THE MAN NEXT DOOR</b>	By Bruce Eliatt.....	122

### SPECIAL FEATURE

<b>A PORTFOLIO</b>	By Ernest C. Schroeder.....	70
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Cover: Mel Hunter

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*Illustrator: Ernest Schroeder*





# I LOVE LUCIFER

BY WILLIAM P. McGIVERN

*Her parents must have been kidding. Who ever heard of naming a sweet, beautiful little girl Lucifer? If she had been some nauseous brat right out of the Brimstone Heights section of Hell, you could understand it. But actually she was just the opposite and as smart as you could want.*

*Maybe that was her trouble. . . .*

**H**I," said the little girl. She was about four-feet tall, with silky blonde hair and big blue eyes. Her face was very pretty, grave and delicate at once, and her clothes had been chosen by someone who had known how to flatter her fragile beauty. She wore a pale blue dress, starched and immaculate, with a full skirt that flared out over a white ruf-

fled petticoat. There was a black bow in her hair that neatly matched her tiny, black patent-leather pumps, and her short white socks were almost as white as her childishly slim legs.

"Well, well," the old man said putting down his newspaper and looking at her with a surprised smile. He had been sitting in the sun, surrounded by space and

silence, his chair tilted back against the wall of a small, stoutly-constructed house. Before him spread the fantastic beauty of a space-ship dump—dozens of acres of tall gleaming ships, moored here permanently, their slim noses pointing upward to the great reaches of space they would never know again.

"Say, where'd you come from?" he asked, shifting around in his chair to face her. His name was John Logan and he had been the caretaker of this space-ship cemetery for twenty-six years; and this was the first time he had entertained such an improbable visitor.

"I came from the city," the little girl said in a sweet low voice.

The city was five miles away, old John knew. "I'll be darned," he said, chuckling. "Did you walk?"

She looked away from him and sighed. "Well, yes," she said patiently, in the voice children use to relegate adult teasing to its proper low status.

"Your Mommy's going to be worried about you," old John said, a trifle concerned.

"I suppose," she said, facing it practically. "But I wanted to come so I came. I'll be back in time for dinner if I don't stay too long."

"Well, you're mighty welcome," old John said. "It's just that I don't want your folks worrying."

"Oh, well," she said matter-of-factly, dismissing the idea. "Can I play here?"

"Sure," old John said. "Johnny!" he called. "Come out here. We got a pretty little visitor."

The door of the house opened and a sturdy, apple-cheeked boy appeared. He was about five, with taffy-colored hair which needed cutting, and a span of freckles running from one cheekbone across a snub nose. His eyes were full of shy wonder as he stared at the small, fragile girl.

"This here's Johnny," old John said to the girl. "He don't see many people so he's apt to be bashful with you for a while. What's your name?"

"Lucifer," she said.

Old John grinned. "That ain't no name for a pretty little girl."

"Well, it's my name anyway."

"I ain't quarelling with you about it," old John said. "But what's your other name. I mean the one you're Mommy and Daddy call you by."

"Lucifer," she told him patiently.

His shrewd gambit having failed, old John gave up. "All right, Lucifer it is," he said.

The little girl took a red rubber ball from her pocket and began bouncing it on the ground. "Come on, let's play," she said to Johnny.

But Johnny pressed closer to old John's leg and stared at her

in silence. His fat little fingers twitched with excitement as he watched her bounce the ball up and down, but his expression was confused and shy.

"I told you he don't see many people," old John said apologetically.

This was true, of course, and it was a great source of worry to the old man. He was Johnny's grandfather; both the boys parents were dead, and it was his task to raise him. And he wasn't doing a very good job, he knew. He dressed him and fed him and saw to it that he got his rest, but his work kept him out here at the cemetery seven days a week and he couldn't provide much companionship for the little boy. Not that he didn't try; but no adult can play satisfactorily with children. The child soon realizes that an adult on his knees playing with blocks and toy soldiers is no substitute for the real thing, which is a real child.

"He'll get used to you after a while," said old John hopefully.

"Sure he will," the little girl said, and went on bouncing her red rubber ball. "It's just because he's so young."

Johnny looked at her for a moment and then sat down and with elaborate indifference began drawing a circle on the ground with a twig. "I'm not young," he said earnestly to a crawling ant.

The little girl played around on the concrete platform that stretched along in front of old John's house and the small storage building which adjoined it. Once she ventured twenty or thirty yards away and stared at the hulls of the great ships which were moored in orderly rows about a city block from old John's house. But she soon returned to continue her games in the more immediate vicinity of old John and his grandson. Finally, as the sun began to settle in the sky, she said regretfully, "Well, I'd better be starting home. May I come here and play tomorrow?"

"Of course, but I don't want your folks worrying about you."

"Well, I'll come then." She marched over to Johnny and handed him the red ball. "You can play with this, if you like."

Johnny took it shyly from her and followed her with his eyes as she marched out the gate and started across the field. On his earnest, pudgy face was an expression of pure adoration.

She came to play at the spaceship cemetery every afternoon that week, and by the third day Johnny was following her about like a puppy. He had never been so happy; after lunch he stood at the gate waiting for her to appear at the top of the hill, fidgeting with impatience. A dozen times a minute he would pester his grand-

father with questions. "Is she coming?" "Really coming?" "Will she always come to play with us?" "How soon will she be here?" "Can't she live with us?"

And when she appeared, marching down the hill, a tiny, perfect figure against the sky, he would race to meet her, whooping and hollering with joy.

She had a wonderful, imaginative way with him. She taught him an intricate version of hopscotch, which they played in the long shadows of the great ships. He was clumsy as a young puppy in his attempts to hop from square to square in the approved sequence, while she was as sure-footed and graceful as a deer. But she never teased him or made fun of him; when he lost his balance or tripped, she would say kindly, "Well, you almost made it, Johnny. You're getting better all the time."

And she told him endless stories and built toy cities for him and made him a pirate's hat from a handkerchief and the black ribbon from her hair.

Eventually they began cautiously exploring the avenues formed by the rows of silent, gleaming ships.

Old John was a bit apprehensive about this and gave them a stern warning about penetrating too far into the maze of derelict space craft. The little girl assured him solemnly that they would be most

careful, but once out of his sight she airily ignored his injunctions. She had a knack of direction and could make half-a-dozen turns and remember each one when she started back. Little Johnny never knew where he was once he lost sight of the house. He trotted happily beside her, listening to her stories, staring at the big ships, as carefree as a wandering bird.

The little girl had an orderly process of investigation. She roamed the great stretch of ground from left to right, going in deeper each day.

"We must see it all," she told Johnny firmly.

"But it's all alike," he said, not caring one way or the other as long as they were together.

"But you can't be sure it's all alike until you've seen it all," she insisted.

"Really?" Johnny said, awed by this logic.

They walked hand-in-hand through the wide empty lanes between the hulls of the giant ships, chatting in their piping, children's voices, occasionally halting to stare upward at the slender noses that pierced the sky hundreds of feet above their heads.

Finally, after two weeks of exploration, they reached the back of the huge yard, which was the farthest point from the house. It was quiet there, and the light was

blocked off by the shadows of the towering ships.

"Well, I guess we'd better go back," she said.

"All right," Johnny said. "Let's go home and play bridge and trains."

"That's what we'll do," she said. Then she cried, "Oh look," and pointed to an object on the ground.

"What?" he said.

"There, right there!" She squatted down and picked up a shred of tobacco in her tiny fingers. Johnny squatted beside her and looked at it with round, solemn eyes. He saw no significance in this half-inch of tobacco but he was interested in anything which interested Lucifer.

"That's what Grampa smokes," he said wisely.

"But he never comes back here, does he?"

"No, he doesn't."

The little girl wriggled her shoulders with excitement. "That means someone else was here," she said.

Johnny wriggled his shoulders, too, excited because she was. "Yeah," he said. "Somebody else was here."

"Who could it be?" she cried happily. "We must find them, Johnny."

Johnny looked around and saw no one. "How can we find them?"

"We'll search until we do," she said, in the same high, ex-

cited voice. "And we'll tell your Grampa and make him help us. Oh, it will be such fun."

"Such fun," Johnny repeated the words, laughing.

Above their heads a lock clicked and the sound of it cracked through the shadowed silence. They looked up and saw a door swing open on the ramp of one of the ships. A man in a leather jacket stepped out on the platform and smiled down at them. "Hello, kids," he said. "Did you get lost?"

"No, we aren't lost," the little girl said. "We were just going home when we found some tobacco."

The man laughed. "You've got sharp eyes, haven't you? But don't go yet. I'm coming down." He pulled a small lever on the hull of the ship and a ladder emerged from the base of the platform and sank swiftly to the ground. They stared without fear as he descended the ladder. He was a big man, with black hair and a black smudge of whiskers along his heavy jawline, and alert, dancing eyes. They didn't fear him because they were the end products of a society which had almost completely eliminated evil. Wars, murders, cruelty — these things were unknown to them; the few unregenerates who still lusted for violence were detected by solar police and quarantined on distant asteroids. For this reason the

little boy and the little girl watched the man without anxiety as he approached and sank down on his haunches beside them. People were good, they knew. The bad people were sent away and never bothered anybody. Therefore this man must be good; otherwise he would not be free.

"What were you looking for down here?" he asked them.

"We were exploring," the little girl said. "We didn't think we'd find any people though. It's very exciting, isn't it?"

"I suppose it is," the man said. "My name is Dan, by the way."

"We're pleased to meet you, Dan," she said gravely.

The man studied their small, alert faces for a few seconds, smiling thoughtfully. "I heard you mention Grampa. Who would that be?"

"That's Johnny's grandfather."

"The caretaker?"

"That's right. I think we must be going," she said. "It was fun talking to you. But he'll be worried about us."

"Wait just a second," Dan said, rubbing a hand along his dark jaw-line. The smile on his lips was strained and hard. "I want to tell you a secret."

"I love secrets," the little girl said, her eyes dancing.

"I love secrets too," Johnny said laughing.

"Well, okay. You're the only

two people in the whole world who know that I'm here. That's a big secret, isn't it?"

"It sure is," she said.

"Now you must keep the secret," he said. "You can't tell anyone you saw me, understand?"

"Why not?" she asked him gravely.

"Because then it wouldn't be a secret anymore," he said. "Do you see?"

"Well, in a way," the little girl said, tilting her head to one side and frowning. "But it isn't an important secret, I don't think."

"That's where you're wrong," he said, speaking in a low impressive voice. "It's terribly important. If anyone knew I was here it would cause the greatest trouble you can imagine."

"What trouble?"

"That's one thing I can't tell you. But I will someday, if you promise me now not to tell anyone you saw me. Will you promise?"

The little girl looked undecided and the man watched her with narrowed eyes. Then she said, "All right, I promise."

"Me too," said Johnny.

"Good, fine," the man said, letting out his breath slowly.

"Can we come to see you again?" she asked him.

"Yes, if you don't tell anyone about me," he said. "Not even his Grampa."

"We won't," she said. "We promise. Come on now, Johnny, we must go. Goodby, Dan."

"Goodby, kids."

"Goodby, Dan," Johnny yelled and ran after the little girl.

Dan watched them skipping off, tiny, unreal figures in the shadows thrown by the great hulls, and then he rubbed his jaw again and ascended the ladder to the platform where he had first appeared. When he looked down they had vanished from his sight; there was nothing below him but the silence and the wide empty streets.

Dan opened the hatchway and walked into the lighted interior of the vast ship. He walked down a bright companionway and turned into a room whose metal walls were covered with dials and control panels. A man sat there behind a desk working on a graph with a sextant. He was small, neatly built, with thick, graying hair and a lined, unrevealing face. The only expression was in his restless, irritable eyes. "Well," he said, without looking up. "Where've you been? Outside?"

"Yeah, outside," Dan said, seating himself and facing the smaller man across the desk. "Taking my evening constitutional, Willie."

The man called Willie looked up sharply then, his eyes hot and angry. "You know that's against orders, don't you?"



"Sure, sure," Dan said easily. "But listen a minute. I heard voices outside and I took a look. We had some visitors."

Willie jumped to his feet so quickly that his chair fell over backward with a crash. "Who were they? Did they see you?" he demanded.

"Sure, I talked with them," Dan said, smiling. "Now calm down. They were a pair of kids. The caretaker's grandson and a funny, dressed-up little girl."

"And you let them get away?"

"Be sensible. If we held them the place would be crawling with people looking for them. So I made them promise me they wouldn't tell anyone about meeting me."

"You took a big chance on our lives."

"Don't worry. Relax. Those kids are going to solve our problem."

The little girl and Johnny stopped at the base of a ship almost within sight of the house. That is, she stopped and Johnny followed suit automatically. She looked gravely at him and said, "You understand that we aren't going to tell, don't you?"

"Sure," he said.

"Even if someone asks us?"

Johnny looked up at her, his round, pink-cheeked face settling into a frown. "But, we'd have to tell if we're asked. We can't lie."

"It isn't lying," she said firmly. "It's just not telling the truth."

"There's no difference," he said stubbornly. He looked very unhappy; disagreeing with her on any point made him feel sad. But he knew lying was bad. Just as bad as stealing or cheating.

"If you tell, I'll never play with you again," she said, staring intently at him with her bold blue eyes. "Do you understand? I'll take my red ball home with me tonight, and I'll never, never come back."

Johnny began to cry. "Don't say that," he pleaded with her. "I won't tell, honest. Say you'll come back tomorrow, please."

"All right," she said, relenting. "Dry your eyes. I'll come and play with you as long as you don't tell."

"I'll never tell," he said, his breath catching unevenly.

They resumed their customary routine the following afternoon, playing with the ball, hopping about the hop-scotch squares, running with shrieks through the cool, pleasant sunlight.

They didn't go exploring among the ships, however.

Everything went on as usual for a few days, and then came an interruption. A small airplane settled down at the front gate and a neatly-dressed young man climbed and strolled over to say hello to John Logan. He had pleasant,

sun-tanned features, and an air of casual good humor about him; but his steady brown eyes were unusually sharp and observant.

He opened a wallet and showed old John his credentials from the Inter-Planetary Service. Old John started to climb to his feet but the young man said, "Don't bother," with a quick little smile. "It's too hot to do much but keep comfortable. How's everything? About as usual?"

"Yes, about as usual," old John said.

"Any strangers around?"

"No, haven't seen any."

"I wouldn't imagine they'd come here," the young man said absently, speaking to himself and not old John. "They'll try for a base where the ships are modern and still armed."

"What's that?" old John asked him.

"Nothing," the young man smiled.

Just then the little girl and Johnny came running around the corner, squealing with excitement.

"Well, well," the young man said, grinning after them. "Whose are those?"

"The boy is my grandson, and the little girl comes over to play with him," old John said.

"I see," the young man said, smiling thoughtfully. "Where does she come from?"

"The city. Says she walks. I expect her father drops her from

his plane just over the field."

"I think I'll join their game," the young man said. "Nothing like playing with kids to keep you young. Go on with your paper; I can find them."

The young man strolled around in back of the warehouse that adjoined old John's house, where his ears had told him the kids were playing. They were seated on the ground, making pictures from leaves, bits of paper and twigs.

"Well, well, a pair of artists," he said, studying their work with his friendly, observant eyes.

"This is a picture of the man," Johnny said.

"Very handsome. What man?"

"The man in —" Johnny stopped and stared solemnly at his shoes. "Any old man," he said.

The young man didn't appear to notice the break in Johnny's reply. He smiled at the little girl who was watching him gravely. "It must be fun playing around here," he said.

"That's why we do it," she said logically.

He laughed and sat down on the ground. "Grown-ups talk pretty foolishly, don't they?"

"Sometimes," she said, turning away shyly.

"Tell me this: have you ever played among the ships?"

"Oh yes, we go all over the yard," she said. "That's fun."

"Have you ever seen anyone

fooling around out there?"

"No."

He looked at Johnny, smiling quizzically. "How about you?"

"How about me what?" Johnny asked him, puzzled.

"Have you ever seen anyone when you were playing among the ships?"

Johnny looked down at his shoes, his lip beginning to tremble. "You heard her," he said. "She said she didn't see nobody."

"I'm asking you now," the young man said gently. "But don't answer right away. I want to tell you first why I'm here. Now both of you know what happens to bad people, don't you? They're put away on asteroids and kept there until we think it's safe for them to return. We try to help them all we can, but there are some who won't be helped. They're very bad men, cruel, violent, and evil, with no respect for other people. They will steal and kill if we let them out, so we don't let them out. But once in a great while these men are cunning enough to get away. That's very serious, of course, and each planet cooperates in finding them and putting them away once again. Do you understand me?"

The little girl nodded, watching him intently, and Johnny nodded too.

"Good," he said. "Well, two men have got away and I'm trying to find them. Not only I, but

dozens of agents from all the other planets have joined in the search. These two men are very dangerous and if we don't find them they'll hurt someone. We think they are on Earth, and we know their intention is to get away from Earth and establish themselves on some remote asteroid or planetoid. They need a space ship, naturally and that's why we're investigating all these old yards. They just might try to equip an obsolete ship and make an escape in it." He paused, studying Johnny's unhappy little face. "Now do you understand how serious this is?"

Johnny nodded sullenly.

"Well, have you seen anyone in the yards? If you have, you must tell me. The man you saw might be one of these very bad men, and we must find them before they do a lot of damage. Did you see anyone, Johnny?"

Johnny looked away from him, fighting back tears. The little girl bounced her rubber ball up and down, watching him with cool blue eyes.

"I didn't see anybody," Johnny said in a low voice. "If I saw someone I'd tell you."

"Why are you so upset? What's troubling you, Johnny?"

Johnny turned to him eagerly, responding to the gentle friendliness in his voice, but the little girl said quickly, "It's all that about the bad men. It's frightened him.

And it frightened me too, mister."

"Was that it?" the young man asked Johnny.

"Yes, I guess so," he said, after a little pause. "That was it, I guess."

The young man got to his feet. "Well, if you see anyone, you tell your grandfather." He stared at the little girl for a moment or so, frowning uneasily, and then he said goodby to them and walked around to where old John was sitting in the sun.

Johnny looked at the little girl with a piteous frown on his face. "Why did you make me lie?" he whispered. "It makes me feel so bad."

"Would you like me to go away and never come back?" she said, looking up at the sky and tossing the ball in the air.

"No, Lucy. Don't go away from me."

"I won't, I promise."

Dan and Willic sat in the control room of the space ship, facing each other across the chart desk. Between them stood a small bottle with about half a dozen pills in it.

"One day's ration," Willie said, staring at Dan with hot, bitter eyes. "We got to make our move. I didn't crash out just to starve to death."

Dan pounded a fist into the palm of his hand. "Where in hell are those kids?"

"Maybe they'll never come

back. You and your bright ideas."

"They've got to," Dan said, but his voice lacked conviction. "Kids are naturally curious. Maybe they're busy with some other game but pretty soon they'll remember this place and come back."

"Yeah? Are you sure they can find it?"

"Well, they found it once."

Willie stared at the bottle of food ration pills. "Everything is set and we're stuck because of a pair of kids. Power plant, communications, everything's set. But no igniter."

"We'll get it."

Willie stood up and began to pace the floor. "I say let's take it," he said. "Beat the old man over the head and take it."

"Very smart, very shrewd," Dan said sarcastically. "By the time we got back and installed it they'd be on our necks. These junk yards may look like country stores but they're booby-trapped like banks. That's why they only need one guard."

Two days later the little girl and Johnny once again penetrated into the depths of the space dump. It was obvious from Johnny's little face that a change had taken place in their relationship. He still adored her but there was a hint of guilt and worry in his expression, very out of place on his round childish face.

"Now let me see," the little girl said, pausing at an intersection, and putting a dainty fist under her chin. "I think it was this way. That's it, I'm sure. Come on, Johnny."

She led surely from one wide lane to another, until finally she reached the spot where they had found the tendril of tobacco. Looking up at the platform of the ship, she called out, "Dan! Hello, Dan."

The door opened with a click and Dan stared down at them from the railing of the platform. His face was pale and gaunt, but he was grinning with excitement. "Well, well, I was hoping you kids would show up. How would you like to come inside and see what a ship looks like."

"That would be thrilling," the little girl said, wriggling her shoulders with anticipation. "Thank you so much."

Johnny was excited too; but beneath it was the persistent tug of guilt. "Grampa told us never to go into the ships," he said.

"Oh, don't be silly," the little girl said. "He'll never find out."

The ladder swooped down at them and the little girl ran eagerly up to the platform, her grave, delicate face working with excitement. Johnny followed reluctantly.

Inside Dan led them through shining companionways to the chart room where he introduced them with a flourish to Willie.

"We're pleased to meet you,"

the little girl said, sedately.

Johnny looked from one man to the other, his eyes widening with anxiety.

"He's just bashful," the little girl said. "Don't worry, he'll get over it."

Johnny said defiantly, "They're the two bad men, Lucy. They're the ones the good man told us about."

Willie, his eyes blazing with anger, took a step toward the little boy, but Dan stopped him with a heavy hand against his chest. "Now, relax," he said, smiling at the little girl. "Who is this 'good man' he's talking about?"

"That was a man who came a couple of days ago," the little girl said. "He told us about some bad men who had run away. He was looking for them."

"Did you tell him about me?"

"Oh, no. That was a secret."

"Now listen to me," Dan said, kneeling and putting his big hands on her thin arms. "Those bad men are trying to find us. That's why we're hiding. If they find us they'll kill us. Do you understand that?"

The little girl wet her lips. "Yes, but I'm scared."

"There's nothing to be frightened of," Dan said softly. "But you've got to help us. Otherwise these bad men will find us and kill us. Will you help us? You

don't want us to be killed, do you?"

"No," the little girl said quickly.

"All right. We've got to get away in this ship. But we don't have an igniter to start it. Do you know what that is?"

The little girl shook her head.

Willie turned away and muttered something under his breath. Dan paid no attention to him; his hard, direct eyes were focused intently on the little girl's. "Now please listen very carefully," he said. "And igniter is a tube about six inches long, and its solid black in color. There are two kinds. One is for very short trips, like if you just wanted to move this ship from one mooring tower to another. The other is long range. Now we need the long range igniter, and there are some in the warehouse next to your Grampa's house."

"He's not her Gramps, he's mine," Johnny said sullenly.

"Do you understand this so far?" Dan said, ignoring the boy.

"Yes, I understand," she said.

"Very well. You're a smart little girl. I knew that right away. Now I'll tell you where to find the igniter we want. This is real important. When you get into the warehouse . . ."

"The next thing is how to get into the warehouse," Dan said, after he had described in detail the location of the igniters. "That's

going to take some planning, because we can't let your Grampa know what we're doing. Otherwise the bad men would kill him too. Do you see that?"

"I can get into the warehouse," the little girl said proudly. "I've watched Gramps do it ever so often."

"How?" Dan asked, watching her shrewdly.

"Well, there's a box in his house with levers in it. He pulls a lever and the door of the warehouse opens. But he can only pull it at a certain time, or else a message goes out somewhere and warns somebody that it isn't Grampa pulling the lever but somebody else."

"I see you've got a good pair of eyes," Dan said, with a glance of amused triumph at Willie.

"And also," the little girl said in the same proud voice, "he has to keep his hand inside the box a certain length of time before he takes it out. Otherwise, if he didn't, *that* would send out a message too."

"Some kind of an electric eye and radar business with a timer on it," Dan said, nodding at Willie. Then he looked searchingly at the little girl. "Can you do this while your Grampa is taking a nap or something?"

"I think so," she said.

"You don't want the bad men to kill him, do you?"

"Oh, no."

"Well, be careful then. Be sure he's asleep. Now do you have any questions? You know where the igniter is, and you know where the short-term ones are. Get into the warehouse, grab a long-terminer and get back here as fast as you can. All right?"

"Yes, we'll hurry."

A short distance from the house the little girl stopped and looked sternly at Johnny, who was weeping. "You know what to tell your Grandfather, don't you?"

"Don't make me lie to him, Lucy."

"You must."

"They're bad men. You're helping them get away. And you're making me lie again."

"Do you want me to go away and never come back?"

"No, but I don't want to be bad."

"Very well. What will you tell your Grandfather?"

The little boy gulped and drew a trembling breath. "That I fell down and that's why I've been crying."

"And what else?"

"That I want to rest for a while, and for him to read to me."

"Good, don't forget any of it," the little girl said.

Old John was alarmed to see his grandson crying. When he heard what had happened he took the boy inside and gave him a glass of

milk. He was greatly surprised when Johnny told him he wanted to lie down and have a story read to him; that just wasn't like the boy. But he led him upstairs to his room, made him comfortable with a pillow, and began to read to him in his slow, patient voice.

Downstairs the little girl walked to the cabinet against the wall, opened it and stared solemnly at a panel of levers. Then she glanced at a clock above the mantle, her lips moving silently, and stood perfectly still for several moments. Drawing a deep breath at last she reached quickly into the cabinet and pulled a lever. She held onto it for ten seconds, then withdrew her hand and ran outside. The main door of the warehouse stood open. Smiling happily, the little girl darted inside, as quick as a bird on the wing. . . .

"Johnny!" she called later in her sweet high voice. "Johnny, are you feeling better?"

She stood before old John's house, her feet turned inward, her small golden head tilted to one side, a picture of innocent childhood. The two bulges in her pockets were obscured by the way she was hugging herself with her thin arms.

"Johnny!" she called again. "Come out and play."

The little boy came quickly through the door, his grandfather trailing after him with a worried little frown on his little-boy face.

"I guess he's chipper enough," old John said. "But he acts like he hurt more than his knee with that fall."

"I'll make him happy again," the little girl said. "Come on, Johnny, let's play."

"I don't want to play," he said.

"Don't be such a goose. Come on."

Holding his hand she drew him reluctantly toward the rows of great ships.

Dan was waiting on the platform of the ship with Willie. The

two men stood perfectly still, staring down at the empty street. Only their eyes gave away their inner desperation.

"You better be right," Willie said.

"It'll work, it's got to work," Dan said. "She's a smart little gal. In fifteen or twenty years we could use her."

"You got faith in the future, eh?"

"I haven't lost it. We'll blast-off here and find a spot. And find others like us. And we'll live like



"But lady — this IS my uniform!"

we want, fight like we want.  
Don't worry, we got futures."

Suddenly they heard the little girl's voice, and the figures of the children came into sight around the corner formed by the hull of the adjoining ship.

"We got it, Dan," the little girl cried, waving at the two men.

"Get inside and get ready," Dan snapped to Willie. "I told you we had futures." He ran down the ladder and grabbed the igniter cylinder from the little girl's hands. "Thanks, kid," he said, looking at both of them with his narrowed, thoughtful eyes.

"You're welcome," the little girl said. "We must hurry back now."

"Just a minute," Dan said smiling thoughtfully at her. "I got a little present for you in the ship."

"Oh, goodie," the little girl said, clapping her hands together happily. "You hear, Johnny? We can show it to the man?"

"What man?" Dan snapped.

"The one I told you about the other day," the little girl said patiently. "The one asking us about you. He was ever so nice. And he came back today. We're playing a game with him now. It's called hide-and-seek. Would you like to play?"

Dan looked quickly up and down the shadowed street, then turned and ran back up the ladder. He disappeared into the ship and

the door closed behind with a soft rush of power.

"They're going away now," Johnny said, sobbing. "You helped them, Lucy. They're bad and you're bad too."

The ship suddenly trembled and moved upward from the ground. It hovered fifty feet in the air and glowing lights appeared in the cones of the rear propulsion rockets.

"You've helped them getaway," Johnny said, weeping and stamping his feet on the ground. His round, apple-cheeked face was frantic with misery. "You're bad, Lucy! I hate you!"

The little girl caught him to her and hugged him with her thin arms. "No, don't say that," she cried softly. Her eyes followed the ship as it roared out of the atmosphere, trailing a crimson train of hot, blue-white fire in its wake.



"Daddy!"

"Let me go, I hate you," Johnny cried. He pulled away from her but she caught him once more and forced the red rubber ball into his chubby hands. "Keep this, Johnny, please."

But the little ball meant nothing to him now. He threw it away and ran down the street, his fat little legs taking him away from her forever; his eyes were blind with tears.

The little girl stared after him through the growing darkness. She looked tiny and lost among the towers formed by the great ships. Then, sighing, she turned and walked in the opposite direction. When she came to a ship whose landing ladder was down, she went aboard and marched to the control room. Opening a heavy, lead-lined door she thrust a black cylinder into an empty receptacle, and then sat down facing the flight panels and visiscreens. She spread her skirt out prettily and then threw two switches.

The ship began to hum with power.

She spoke one word. "Venus."

A voice answered. "We have you here. Results?"

"Excellent," she said. "They've blasted-off with a short-term igniter. I expect they'll explode within an hour. See you at 22-xc. I'll be on the usual pattern."

"Any trouble at all?"

She hesitated. Then: "No, nothing at all. I gave them a short-term igniter and kept a good one for myself. I could have had help from Earth but this seemed less dangerous."

The little girl sighed softly as she looked out for the last time across the spires of the moored ships. Then she threw another switch and the ship began to move. . . .

Old John and the young man from Inter-Planetary Service found little Johnny wandering hysterically through the maze of ships an hour or so later. By that time the young man knew what had happened and was very sheepish about it.

"Yes, I'm sure she's good," he said, much later to the little boy. This was about the fiftieth time he'd said it. "I found out she was an agent, just like me, but from Venus. I'll never live this one down if I get to be a thousand. She's good, all right!"

"Good," Johnny said, laughing. He stared at the sky, pure adoration in his eyes. "I love you, Lucy," he shouted. "I did all the time." And he was thinking about where he had thrown the little red rubber ball, and wondering if he could find it in the morning.

Somchow he was sure he could.





# ONE WAY STREET

BY JEROME BIXBY

*The multiple-worlds theme is quite a common one in science fiction. It extrapolates some scientific theory — heaven knows which one — into the premise that you're really a limitless number of people in many worlds doing any number of things at the same time. Confused? Maybe this story will clarify it for you — and maybe not.*

PETE INNES skidded his '49 Dodge coupé into a tree at fifty-five per, out along Northern Boulevard, one Monday morning. He was on his way to work in Manhattan from Greenhill, Long Island, where he had a ranch-type house, a wife, a dog named Prince, an eleven-year-old son . . . a life.

He started swearing as the car

turned over. As the top crunched in, he was thinking, *Now why in hell should I black out for a second and side-swipe a tree? Going to die, damn it.*

A little academic — but you get that way when you unexpectedly see the scythe coming. Your brain works faster than your glands: you don't have time to feel

much, you only think: your first impulse is a kind of interest.

Luckily the impact of the side-swipe flung Pete over on his face across the front seat: the car flipped, and the top mashed down, but Pete didn't get his head broken — it wasn't there.

The car turned over again: Pete rattled back and forth between the seat-cushions and the crumpled top only a few inches away from his back. Metal howled; glass shattered, dispersing like water; a tire went *whop!* and then another. Pete's muscles wrenched agonizingly, particularly those in his back and neck.

The car lit upright and settled, rocking. Thousands of tiny squeakings for a few seconds. Silence.

Pete kept hearing all the noises, retaining them. He kicked until the left-hand door flew open. He inched himself backward toward it, and did all right until his shoulders reached the steering-wheel, which had been shoved back a foot nearer the seat. He tried to turn and crawl past on his side; he couldn't turn; the squashed roof was too tight overhead. All he could do was let out his breath, pull in his shoulders, and squirm.

His legs emerged, waved in air; he bruised a shin on the running-board. He screwed up his arms and shoved against the steering-wheel, which was now about even with his chin. He went out the door, his coat up over his head.

His feet found ground, then his knees. He was kneeling, his cheek against the cold metal of the sprung door. Hating the car, he shoved himself away from it, hard, with both hands. He went over backwards on grass and dirt. He lay on his back, and brought his hands up to his face and started to cry.

A screech of brakes; footsteps running. Someone knelt beside him. Two hands touched his wrists lightly, as if they wanted to draw his own hands away from his face but were afraid to.

"Are you okay, mister?" a voice said.

The hands got rough. Pete's hands were dragged away from his face. Then the voice sighed, and Pete felt a breath of tobacco across his face: "Lord, I thought your eyes were cut up."

Now Pete was shuddering — long shudders that started in his abdomen and ran up to shake his shoulders.

Another screech of brakes. More footsteps. A new voice said, "Man, how'd he get out of *that* one! He okay?"

The first voice said, "I think so. He's half nuts. Shaken up. Got the hell scared outta him . . . oh, I'm sorry, lady — I didn't see you there."

"I've had first aid," she said. "Move over. I'll feel him."

Pete found that funny. He be-

gan to laugh. Stopped. Hell with it.

There was a studying pause. A light woman's touch ran over his head, his jaw, his neck. Down along his chest. Ran over again, a little harder. It tickled. Pete laughed.

He got a slap on the left cheek that rocked his head; a slap to bring him out of it.

Shock to hysteria to rage. He said ten filthy words, most of them present participles.

The woman said, "I think he's all right. Some ribs broken — bad to laugh."

Pete tried to sit up. He said another few words — gasped them, rather, clapping one hand to his side.

The woman said, "Get down."

She helped him do it. He felt a crunching in his side. Pain was starting. He took a look around at the faces, saw nothing, closed his eyes again and waited for things to happen. He wasn't his own problem, right now: he was theirs. Social action was underway: policemen would come, and an ambulance, and he would be taken care of. People were focussed on him: it often takes disaster to do it, but that's when you're loneliest.

Sound of a motorcycle. Footsteps coming up, then going away at a run; the motorcycle blurted off. About that time Pete slipped into a pain-shot night.

The first thing that was wrong was the telephone in the hospital where he woke up about noon, the same day.

The nurse who was straightening his blanket said, "How are you feeling, Mr. Innes?"

He winced up at her. "Alive."

"Aches and pains?"

"They're lovely."

"It was a bad crash. The officers said the only thing that saved you was that you were pinned between the crumpled roof and the seat — you couldn't bounce around a lot. Except the steering-wheel caught your ribs."

"Has my family been notified?"

"I came in to see if you were awake. Your wife's waiting outside."

Pete sighed. "It'll be nice to stay off the job for a while and romp with my kid . . . as if I could romp!"

The nurse paused at the door, smiling a little severely. "You know, it's no help to put your identification in code, or whatever it was."

Pete blinked.

"Your wallet told us your name, of course — but you have your address and telephone number wrong."

"I don't get you."

"The phone especially — the address was almost right; 1801 instead of 1811. But the thing you have down for your phone number doesn't make any sense. There's

no such exchange. We had to check with Information before we could locate your family."

"You're very pretty," Pete said slowly, "and evidently nuts."

"Thank you, and I'm not," she smiled. "You'd better get that straightened out."

"My identification," Pete said, "is in perfect order —"

But she was gone.

He lay there frowning.

The stuff he'd had in his pockets at the time of the crash was piled neatly on the table beside the bed. He reached over and picked up his wallet and leafed it open to his celluloid-covered card:

Peter M. Innes  
1801 South Oak Street  
Greenhill, Long Island  
New York  
Highview 6-4509]

It was absolutely correct.

The nurse had said it was wrong. Hadn't they *tried* it? The phone? She'd said there was no such exchange. There was a telephone on the table. He gave it a sour look as he put the wallet back beside it. Ordinary black French phone. Maybe a little more streamlined than most —

With a dial that went like this: A-123 — B-234 — C-345 — D-456 — E-567 — and so on to J-000 . . . whatever that was.

He was staring at the phone and shaking his head when Mary came in.

Tears, of course. "Oh, thank

God, thank God, thank God," she kept saying against his shoulder. The pressure of her against his side hurt, but he pressed her closer, thinking the same thing: *thank God*.

Then she was saying, "Oh, darling, I'm sorry, I'm so sorry —"

"For what?" he said.

"The argument." She pressed against his side. "You wanted to die. I just know that's why you had the accident!" He couldn't help gasping at the pressure. She made a shocked sound and pulled back: "Oh, darling, I was hurting you —"

"Loved it," he said.

Her dark eyes were filled with tears, and she did something she hadn't done in years. She bent her head so her hair fell over her face and she brushed the hair across his face, lightly. He inhaled with satisfaction.

"You're not mad, then?" she asked through her soft hair.

"Mad about what?"

"The argument."

He thought a moment, hand on the back of her neck. "What argument?"

The hair swished across his face delightedly. Then her nose was pressed under his ear, and something else happened that hadn't happened in years: she caught a bit of skin between her teeth and worried it with her tongue. His hair lifted.

"Then you're *not* angry any

more?" she whispered softly.

"I—" He gulped, feeling many things. "No, honey, I'm not mad. I—I've even sort of forgotten what we argued about."

"Oh, you *sweet*," she said.

With gentle force he removed the source of the disturbance, getting her to sit up. "This bed's too small for two," he said. "Besides, people like doctors keep wandering in. Cut it out, honey."

She got out a tissue and wiped tears away. She wasn't crying any more — just dry-sobbing a little. She sat on the edge of the bed and held his hand. "You get well," she said.

"Not much to it. Just a couple of busted ribs and some bruises, they tell me. I can leave in a couple of days." He looked at her with a fondness he hadn't felt in some time: maybe the accident had been a good thing. Maybe it had struck away some unpleasantness — or indifference. Married for twelve years. Up and down. A kid. Getting on toward forty, both of them. She was still a darned attractive woman and he wore his years better than most. Lately they'd been — well, just apart. But now she seemed to have taken on flame, and it was welcome warmth. Let it burn. He could feel response in himself; and that old fondness. Flicker, flicker, flame —

"It was an awful quarrel, wasn't

it?" she said. "I've felt awful for days. But it was my damned old pride . . . if you thought I was fooling around with Phil Tarrant, I wasn't going to try to change your mind."

"Phil Tarrant," he said vaguely. "Phil Tarrant . . . do you mean Phil Terrance?"

She frowned. "Phil Tarrant. Our next-door neighbor." Then she smiled. "Our big, bald neighbor, who's just about as attractive to me as a water-buffalo! Oh, Pete, how could you ever think I was having an affair with him? And I'm sorry I threw the picture at you —"

Pete Innes closed his eyes. His next-door neighbor was a big fellow named Phil Terrance. Phil Terrance had all his hair. He was a nice guy, happily married: Pete had never in his life said a word, or even thought a thought, about the possibility of an affair between Phil and Mary. *Never*. He knew damned well that Phil was the big, jovial type of guy that Mary found sexually unattractive. Besides, Mary wasn't the affairing kind: after twelve years he still had to employ the most delicate gambits or else meet a wall, and lately things had simply been *nicht*. Now, of course, Fate had struck a spark; the prognosis was good; maybe if he *had* suspected her of tramping, he would also have suspected that someone had

done a fair job of velicitating her. But he didn't suspect anything of the sort, and he'd certainly never accused her of it.

It would all straighten out.

"What picture?" he asked cautiously.

"Oh!" She bent and kissed him. "You just want to pretend you've forgotten all about it! It's *sweet!* But don't. Let's admit honestly that it happened, and *then* forget it. Now — I'm sorry."

"I — I'm sorry too," he said.

Indirection was in order.

"Lucky you didn't hit me," he said.

"Well —" she grinned a little shamefacedly. "I really didn't throw it to hit. But it certainly wrecked the finish on the piano!"

Piano. . . .

He *had* no piano. They'd been planning to buy one, for Pete Jr., but they hadn't yet.

It was too much.

"*What* piano?" he said, half-rising against pain. "We don't *have* one. Mary, what in blazes is going on? I don't remember you throwing any picture. I don't remember any argument. Phil Terrance is *not* bald. I've never accused you of fooling around with him. *What's going on?*"

The doctor said, "It's probably only temporary, Mr. Innes. Amnesia induced by shock."

Pete said patiently, "Doctor, I do not have amnesia. There is

no blank spot in my memory. I remember everything right up to the moment of the crash."

"Well," said the doctor, smiling, "I wouldn't worry about it. Not exactly amnesia. You've just forgotten certain things, and gotten others a little mixed up."

Pete said, "Like hell I have."

"You wouldn't *know*, Mr. Innes. You wouldn't know if you had things mixed up. They would seem real to you, even if you were seeing pink dragons. But — well, after all —" he indicated the telephone dial — "you have described some other sort of telephone, for example. What can I say, Mr. Innes? I am fifty-seven years old. Since I was a child, telephone dials have been numbered in this manner. They're that way all over the United States, I believe, and very possibly all over the world."

"They're not."

The doctor sighed. "You're a little confused from shock, that's all. I wonder if you'd mind talking with one of our staff psychologists —"

"I would."

"I've already taken the liberty of calling him."

"I resent that," Pete said coldly.

"You shouldn't."

"I'm as sane as you are."

"I'm sure you are. But he will be able to do a more expert job of convincing you that the things

you imagine to be true, and the things you imagine not to be true, are simply as they are and must be accepted as such — because you *are* sane."

Pete reached for the telephone. He let his fingers think for him. He could make no sense out of the number system anyway. He dialed his office — not the number, but the fingerhole-sequence.

A voice said, "Yes?"

Pete said, "Reilly, Forsythe and Sprague?"

Pause: "Sorry, buddy, wrong number."

Pete tried again, letting his fingers do the aiming. He dialed his mother's place in the Bronx: "Mom?"

"Not that I know of," a man's voice said dryly.

Pete slammed the phone back on the carriage so hard the bell tinged. He lay back and closed his eyes.

Mary said — she was crying a little again — "Oh, Pete, darling.

Pete compressed his lips.

"You'll be all right. . . ."

"I am all right."

*And the whole world's wrong.*

"Of course you're all right," the psychologist said. "You're not crazy."

"Don't use kid terms on me, doc," Pete said. "I took psych in college. I'm not afraid I'm 'crazy'. I can describe the condition you

think I'm in just as resoundingly as you can. But I'm not *in* it."

"Then you didn't pay attention to a very important point in your psych course," the psychologist said. "It's the hardest thing in the world for even a trained person to apply to himself. You should know that a person who is illuded or hallucinated or subject to fantasies of any kind cannot be expected to —"

"So I'm —"

"— the validity of his beliefs —"

"— I'm not in a position to evaluate in terms of the real world," Pete said wearily. "*A priori* you're right, *ipso facto* I'm wrong."

"— needs outside assistance, don't you see?"

*"Caveat emptor."*

The psychologist indicated the phone, as the doctor had done. "This is the real world. It exists. Evidence. As a lawyer you must appreciate evidence."

Pete Innes thought very deliberately and carefully for two, three, four, five minutes, while the psychologist waited, as psychologists do.

Then he said, "I suppose so. You *must* be right. I hope I sound sane. Phones have always been built that way. I have a piano. My wife threw a picture at me . . . what picture, honey?"

"The picture we took last summer of Pippy," Mary said.

Pete's lips tightened. "Pippy?"  
"Our dog . . . our . . . don't you — remember?"

"I remember," he said. *Our dog Prince.*

"It should pass," said the psychologist. "Traumatic amnesia and fantasies. I would advise you strongly to see an analyst if it doesn't pass — you may not be able to recover all you've forgotten, but he should be able to —"

"Get out," Pete said.

"— and help you adjust." The psychologist rose. "I'll drop in later."

"Don't." Pete stiffened his body on the bed, wanting to leap and scream. "Get out, Mary."

"Pete —"

The psychologist said quietly, "Come, Mrs. Innes." He paused at the door. "You won't like this, Mr. Innes, but I'll naturally have to take precautions. In your state —"

"I understand," Pete said. "I accept. Have me watched. I don't care. I just don't want to talk any more."

The psychologist went out. Mary started after him, nose buried in tissue.

Pete felt two tears start down his own cheeks. Suddenly his eyes filled. He yearned. He was terrified and cold. His back teeth gritted together. "Stay, Mary," he said.

They were close on the bed for a few minutes, she lying on his

broken ribs and hurting them, he hugging her fiercely so it would hurt more. Pain was real.

She was crying silently, eyes and nose running — the way she cried when she was really miserable, not just being feminine. After a while she got up and went over to the window. The venetian blinds were down and slanted shut. "Maybe some sun will cheer us up," she said.

Up went the blinds.

Pete knew he was in the New York Hospital. On the tenth floor. Looking out the window he could see the Chrysler building, downtown on 42nd Street, and beyond it, the Empire State building, with a slender spire atop it, like the Chrysler, instead of a never-used blimp mooring-mast and TV tower surmounting, good old Channel 4.

He screamed. It all came out. A large interne was in the door and at his side, looking wary, before he had exhausted the breath. Mary fainted.

Two months later they let him go home.

He objected at first to what was virtually imprisonment, but they said, "Citizens' Protection Law, you know."

He didn't know. And he was a lawyer.

The psychiatrists were good. They worked hard. He understood that their fees were paid by the

goverment — Citizens' Protection Law. Well, fine.

They made him socially acceptable. They showed him where and how he was wrong. They brought in proof by the armload — books, photographs, films, actual documents and records of his own life containing mention of three jobs he couldn't remember ever having held and numerous other interesting data, such as his former marriage to a girl named June Massey —

Once he had been engaged to a girl named Jane Mason.

They brought in the proof and talked to him about it.

They convinced him. They proved that the world he lived in was not the world he thought he knew. They proved that he was imagining. That he was occluded here, and was building dream-stuff of asynchronic data there. They proved that the Empire State building had always had a spire; that the U. N. had resolved the Korea conflict two months after hostilities had commenced; that Prokofieff — always a favorite of Pete's — had not died in 1953 but was still alive, though ailing; that television was not yet commercially perfected; that Shakespeare had written no *Hamlet* —

He quoted from the play. They were amazed. They said, My God, you should write!

There were times when he

thought he'd go crazy. Other times he was certain that he already was. There were still other times when it was all a diabolic plot — Pete Innes vs. the World.

Heady conceit. For a madman.

Pete wasn't, of course . . . just a whim that delighted him, and concerned the psychiatrists, at one stage in his progress.

There had been no Shelley. He quoted Shelley.

Keats, they said.

He quoted Keats.

My God, you should write!

Still, they adjusted him. Physical facts talked.

But he never ceased to recall the world he'd imagined. It remained as clear in every "remembered" detail as this one, the real one, was in physical fact.

They adjusted him.

After all, he was an intelligent man. The theory of what had happened to him was clear: the actuality of it, once presented authoritatively to him, was equally as clear.

They adjusted him.

Now he knew what it must feel like to believe you are Napoleon. Long fall from the saddle.

Emotional acceptance came.

He believed.

Home was different. Well, he'd had to expect it to be.

Pippy was a cocker. *Prince had been a Collie.*

His house had five rooms. *Six.*

It was green. *Rust.*

There was a flower garden out back. *Vegetable garden.*

Pete Jr. was dark-haired. *Tow-head.*

He wandered around, acquainting himself with his life. Some things were a lot different. There were shades of difference in others. Still others were identical, or so nearly so as to defy him.

His library . . . he went over it book by book, and came across his copy of Bertrand Russell's HISTORY OF WESTERN PHILOSOPHY — the one he'd taken to Russell when the philosopher was in New York on a lecture tour back in '45.

He sat there, hugged it, cradled it, loved it. It was a remembered thing. Then he opened it.

He had *never* made marginal notes in that book.

But obviously he had.

Adjust.

That night Phil Terrance — Phil Tarrant — came over. Phil was bald. *Brown hair.* Pete found that he was evidently not quite so close to Phil as he'd been in his dream-world. He mentioned the golf games they had played together.

They hadn't.

Undressing for bed, Pete said, "Where do you suppose I *got* that world, honey? The dream one. It's so — complete."

Mary tossed aside her slip and swayed a little toward him, her

dark eyes inviting, warm, soft.

"Forget your dream-world, Pete," she whispered. "This is real."

A much nicer, more open bit of enticing than he could remember Mary ever doing. He wondered what had triggered her, and thanked whatever it was. And she had a small mole on her stomach that he didn't remember.

They made the kind of vigorous, exhausting love they hadn't made in years . . . the years of his dream-world, at any rate. Now his still-mending ribs made it both a little difficult and delightful. They laughed at the necessary concessions, and had fun. This was a sweeter Mary than dream-Mary.

In the following days home from the office he spent a lot of time at the typewriter.

Doing?

He was writing a conspectus of the dream-world. He was looking for identities, similarities, antitheses in the real world, and noting them. He was pouring out his incredible fantasy before it should vanish in years.

He used a two-column system:

DREAM-WORLD	REAL WORLD
Jewish State: Israel	Sholom
FDR died in 1945	Same
Atomic power	Not yet
Stalin dead	Alive
Lautrec a dwarf	Normal
. . . and long pages of intense	

lawyer's analysis, drawing fine and significant distinctions, searching for historical bases for existing things and measuring them against "memories." The manuscript grew to several hundred pages. It could have gone on forever. It's perhaps easier to change a world than one's understanding of it.

Through this project, and the omnivorous reading it involved, he became closer to the real world. His analyst — he had consulted one, and now visited him twice a week — was thoroughly in favor of it. He learned. At first it was often shocking. Then only exciting. At last, enjoyable, nothing more.

Then it palled. Pete ceased writing. Six months had passed. He only read. More calmly, now. The need to discharge tension, and even a tiny lingering disbelief, had vanished.

There had been newspaper publicity, of course. At first just a little — then, as the sensational aspects of his case got out, a lot.

#### NEW YORK LAWYER HAS DREAM-WORLD Sex, Science and Sociology on Another Earth

The *Times* did a dignified interview. *Life* gave him four pages, *Time* a column, *Scientific American* a squib.

Adjusted. And far happier than he'd ever been in his life.

Then they came and tore it all

to shreds. Ripped it all to pieces.

The dry voice on the phone said, "Mr. Innes, we've read about your case in the *Scientific American*."

"Yes?" said Pete, wondering what they were selling or buying — he'd already signed for several articles.

The voice hesitated. "I don't think this should be discussed over the phone. May we come and see you personally, at your convenience?"

"Who are you?"

"Forgive me — I — this is all rather extraordinary, Mr. Innes. Most extraordinary. My colleagues and I . . . allow me, I am Doctor Raymond van Husen. I — hello? Hello?"

Pete was staring across the room. At his bookcase. At the green-jacketed book entitled THE COMING CONQUEST OF THE ATOM, by Dr. Raymond van Husen, twice Nobel Prize winner. Van Husen, who in the dream-world had figured so importantly in the Manhattan Project and Oak Ridge.

"Yes, Doctor," he said. "I've heard of you. What can I do for you?"

"What is important," said van Husen, "is what *we* may already have done to *you*, and what we may be able to do about it."

Pete clutched the phone so hard his knuckles crackled in his ear. "*Done to me?*"

"I — well, actually, *we* didn't do it to you. If our theory is correct . . . Mr. Innes, I think we had better come and see you."

"Tonight," Pete said harshly, standing alone between wavering realities. "Tonight."

Van Husen's grey goatee bobbed as he said, "Parallel worlds, Mr. Innes. Coexisting worlds. We believe that you are on the wrong one, simply on the wrong one."

Pete was sprawled in the big chair by the fireplace. Enrique Patiño, physicist, sat on the piano bench. Doctor Hazel Burgess, an attractive woman of fifty or so, was on the couch, sitting beside Mary.

Pete said, "Simply on the wrong one."

Mary said, "Pete . . . Pete, what are they saying?"

"They're saying I'm on the wrong world. Don't listen."

Mary bit the back of her hand.

Pete took a belt at the straight Scotch he held. "So your machine got out of whack," he said. "Somebody forgot to tighten a bolt, you say. It flipped on its mounting, you say. Instead of shooting its tight beam at the pretty target, it went through the side of the building, across Flushing Meadows and wallop me before you got it under control. You say."

"Not *our* machine," said Hazel Burgess. "Our machine radiated

at the real Peter Innes, you see."

"That's either stupid or insulting," Pete said. "I think it's both, in fact. *I'm* Peter Innes." He took another belt.

"I'm sorry," Hazel Burgess said. "I meant that our machine radiated at the Peter Innes who belongs on this Earth. The machine on your Earth radiated at you." She stopped and bit her lip. "I am sorry. When we read about you . . . it was quite a shock to finally realize what must have happened —"

Pete stood up quietly and, without a break in his motion, flung his glass into the fireplace with every ounce of his strength. Scotch hissed on the burning logs. "Damn you," he said. "Damn you, one and all."

"Two Earths," van Husen said, looking at the blue alcohol flames. "Almost identical. Two almost identical experiments, aligned on the time continuum. Two almost identical mishaps. A transposition of Peter Inneses. It must have happened that way. There is no other satisfactory explanation. Very likely identical results as well. The automobile accident — the hospitalization — the . . . m'm —" He looked at Mary, caught Pete's eyes full-blast and looked away, goatee bobbing.

"Don't be a damned old Dutchman, Raymond," Hazel Burgess said. "My God!"

"Please go," Pete whispered.

"Perhaps we can help you, Mr. Innes," Enrique Patiño said softly. His wrinkled face turned toward Mary. The look he gave her was old and Latin. "If you wish us too, that is."

Pete swayed on his feet.

Mary got up and half-ran into his arms. "Peter, I don't understand —"

*Mary? Was it Mary?*

"Our experiment," said van Husen, "was an attempt to —"

"God damn your experiment. Get out and leave us alone!"

"But, Mr. Innes, we may be able to reverse the effect and return you —"

At last tears came. They rushed. Sometimes a man has to cry like a baby — when the world gets as fearsome as a baby's. Or when there isn't any world.

"He's been drinking since you called," Mary said, holding him fiercely.

The scientists left. And they left a card:

GRADEN RESEARCH INSTITUTE

Flushing, N. Y. 27 F-E 395

He became a meaningless man. A wrongness. Earth beckoned. His own reality called: called in a giant voice that sounded his nature like a taut wire, now that he knew.

He couldn't doubt.

Men of van Husen's caliber didn't speak loosely. They'd all seemed pretty positive. And, of

course, it explained everything. Earth called.

At times he felt alone in the Universe. This Universe. Mary lay warm beside him, holding him with body and mouth, and this Universe was an icy microfilm between them that kept him alone.

He became aware of a force. A tension grew in him, became nearly intolerable. *He shouldn't be here.* Originating in the farthest slow galaxies, transmitted to nearer ones, gaining amplification with every angry star, transmitted again and again, strong with the hearts of novae and the rioting pulse of variables, a complex of forces seemed to be gathering — forces that were trying to push him out of this Universe: as if in some manner he were alien, a dissonance. Fact? Fancy? Had he added one atom too many to the sum of this Universe? If so, he might break the gears.

Pete Innes, Universe wrecker. Once or twice he watched red sunsets, wondering if this might be the night of his nova.

No longer alone.

Pressure.

This Universe was too much with him.

The little things closed in:  
Eroica      Napoleon Symphony  
Democrats    Jeffersons  
Trueorfalse? Trueorfalse?

This Universe hated him. Resisted him. Struck at him. Whether

real or subjective, the sensation grew to a torment and a terror. It lashed at him from directions he could not defend against, or even define . . .

Unable to sleep, he would pace in darkness comparing his now-situation with his then-situation.

Earth *II* — he thought of this world that way — was preferable to him in many, many ways. He liked his job — he'd discovered that he was a partner in his firm —

But only one was important. The love and warmth at home . . . the new Mary . . .

He paced, and cringed, and thought, and cursed this Universe — and decided.

She cried when he said he must go back to his Earth.

He explained and explained. He wasn't her Pete. She wasn't his Mary. This wasn't his world. He could not remain here and stay sane.

"Oh, I love you," she wailed. "I won't let you do it."

"You'll get your own Pete back," he said heavily. "On my Earth he must be going through just about the same thing as I am here. The scientists will have contacted him. He'll be planning to return."

"I don't want any other Pete! I want *you*!"

*That*, he thought, *goes double*, and he went for a long and miserable walk. Nothing else to do.

He wondered if his counterpart, his *doppelganger*, was out walking too, feeling all the things he felt: the tearing need to get back to his own life-situation, but with specific regrets. Perhaps he'd even found in Mary *I* something comparable to the things Pete had found in Mary *II*. It was possible, in this intricate business of balances.

Also, he probably had a hating Universe on his back —

At any rate, there was no way out. Or rather, the *only* way was out.

And his double on Earth would be thinking the same thing, for whatever reasons. Identity. Or near identity.

He decided on one last week. Mary seemed reconciled. The reality of the situation, and its necessities, had at last become clear to her; or perhaps she had at last accepted it.

They spent that last week almost as lovers. They went out. Nightclubs, the theater. They had fun together. Their sexual encounters were spiced with a certain feeling of adventure, discovery. They had fallen in love for the second time, really, yet for the first time, really, and they made the most of it — she perhaps unconsciously trying to hold him, he enjoying for the last time the woman Mary *I* was not.

The day they drove to the

Graden Research Institute, he expected her to cry. But she didn't. She seemed to be thinking.

His tears? . . . They would come later, on lonely Earth. Best if she didn't know how much he cared.

The machine was bigger than he'd thought it would be. An enormous metal tube running off at a tangent from something very like a cyclotron. At the end of the tube was a metal ball about three feet in diameter, suspended on an equatorial axis. One round red glass eyelet peered out of the surface opposite the end of the tube — peered into a large, open-ended metal box, through which was strung an intricate webwork of wires.

"We wanted to send one atom — just one atom — into another dimension," Enrique Patiño said.

"So, I'm almost certain, did our counterparts on your Earth. But we sent our Peter Innes instead. And they sent you to us." He pointed at the two desks that stood back-to-back across the room. They were heaped high with papers. "We have computed. This has taught us interesting things. It would appear that one atom — and, believe me, our beam would scarcely touch more than one at a time — one atom will insist upon taking the organic whole of which it is a part with it on its trip between dimensions."

"I wonder if I crashed my car, then," Pete mused, "or his. Where's the thin red line? Molecules mixing, the vapor that is me mixed with the vapor that is the car —"

"His, we believe. It would be impossible to say for certain. It is our belief, however, that the phenomenon of transposition-of-the-whole applies only to living matter and all objects with the range, to certain degrees of distance and intensity, of its electromagnetic field —"

He talked on.

Pete looked at the machine.

Was another Peter Innes, on another Earth, looking at a machine right now?

He hoped so. And he hoped he was a good man. Mary *II* was a damned good woman.

"Where," he said, "do I get my ticket?"

"This way," called van Husen, from over by the metal ball. He'd been fussing with the round red eye.

"Shouldn't there be a fanfare?" Pete said sourly. "Reporters, cameras? Not that I'm in the mood."

"We —" Enrique Patiño paused. "Understand, Mr. Innes, we would like to delay your departure, at least for a short while, and question you about your Earth. We might have questioned you before, but we had no wish to invade the privacy of your rather peculiar

domestic situation. We wanted you to come to us. Now . . . well, I'm afraid we will have to be satisfied with the observations of *our* Peter Innes. Our recent work indicates that it may be very dangerous for you to remain here. Dangerous for you — and for us."

"I've felt it too," Pete said. "Out of tune. I don't jitter right."

"We made our decision this morning. We were preparing to invite you when you came of your own accord."

"And if you'd invited me, and I said no, you'd have called out the Marines."

Patiño smiled an astonishingly young smile. "Oh, yes. Actually, we doubt that your introduction into our Universe will affect it for many millions of years. The disruption would have to proceed to fantastically high levels before it would make itself felt. But as scientists, we cannot take the chance of letting you stay any longer. Your influence is theoretically cubed every sixty-one point o-four-six-nine hours."

"I'm not the same as when I came," Pete said. "I've shed millions of molecules. I've incorporated others. I'm wearing different clothes."

"We must predict some sort of compensating mechanism, and hope we're right."

"Then maybe there's no prob-

lem . . . aside from the way *I* feel?"

Patiño sighed. "Perhaps. But we know so *little* about such things . . . which accounts for the lack of fanfare. After you've gone we will dismantle the machine. The less anyone knows about this line of research, the better. Perhaps, right now, we are being foolish. But perhaps we should be terrified."

"Well," Pete said a little nervously. "When do we start?"

"Any time."

"When will *they* start?"

"When we do . . . or vice versa. I believe that identity on that level can be relied on: we seem to be expressions of Universal laws . . ."

"Now," snapped van Husen. "Let's not talk all day."

"If I could only take — a book or something," Pete said.

Patiño shook his head. He took Pete by an arm and stood him in front of the globe. The red glass eye pointed at Pete's forehead.

Pete had said his good-byes to Mary. He didn't look at her now.

It happened very quickly.

Patiño lifted a hand in farewell.

Van Husen pressed a button

somewhere behind the metal ball.

Mary cried, "Pete —"

Machinery whined to instant high-pitch, drowning her cry.

Mary was in his arms.

The laboratory was about the same. So was the machine. The

round red eye lost its brilliancy. The whining stopped.

Everybody just stood and breathed.

Holding Mary, Pete looked around and smiled. He said, "I hardly recognize you without your beard, Dr. van Husen."

Then he said to Mary, "I'm glad you did that. I couldn't ask you to."

Now she was crying. "I — I thought that if I did, then *she* would . . . or maybe *she* thought of it first —"

"You'll like my Pete Junior," he said softly. "And the Mary who just left here will be a good mother to yours."

The scientists were coming alive. Ten minutes of gleaming-eyed inquiry followed, after which Pete said that he and Mary would like to get along.

Van Husen trailed them out into the corridor. The other two,

an identical Patiño and a somewhat less attractive Hazel Burgess, were busy dismantling the machine.

At the elevator door van Husen said, "You *will* cooperate with us, Mr. Innes?"

"With deepest gratitude," Pete said, and squeezed Mary's arm.

The elevator door opened. Inside was nothing but a steady blue light.

Van Husen said politely, "After you."

Pete said, after a moment, in a dead voice, "It's okay, darling — our elevators are different. Quite different."

Grimly he stepped off into empty blue space, five stories above the ground, Mary at his side. Van Husen followed.

They floated on blue light toward the ground floor.

Pete thought: *The only thing to do when you're going down a one-way street to nowhere is pull over to the side: I'll pull over here, I guess: I won't tell Mary: I'll keep quiet, and the others will too.*

His eyes opened wide: *How many others?*

Down.

The ground floor.

*We'll just have to see if it's millions of years or tomorrow. Maybe this one won't hate me.*

It wasn't tomorrow. And it didn't.

He was content.



# THE WEAPON

BY T. D. HAMM

*In struggles for supremacy, from a spat in the kitchen to the war of the worlds, the woman is never unarmed.*

Leila Adams glared down the rutted, dusty track leading away from the dooryard and uttered a single four-letter word emphatically expressive of her feelings toward the forest, the Senator and the situation he had embroiled her in.

Only yesterday he had suddenly declared his intention of making what he pompously referred to as a "reconnaissance" and left walking rather lamely in his too-tight city shoes; absolutely tiptoeing down the very center of the narrow road as though expecting to be sprung upon by some unimaginable monster.

Leila set her lips shrewishly. With or without him she was leaving here tomorrow for civilization. The lake, the forest, the little cabin held no charms for her urban eye. Even as a child she had scorned playgrounds and parks.

Her body was to her both a weapon and a tool and she spent on it the painstaking care of an

artisan with a valued instrument. And with reason. From a first early experiment with the grocer's boy, it had carried her through a succession of out-of-town buyers and the vice-president of the clothing chain for which she modeled, to her present comparatively exalted position with fat, paunchy State Senator Layton.

And now here they were, or rather here *she* was, God knew how many miles in the backlots of Northern Michigan. No gas in the car and miles from a filling station. No shops, no beauty parlors, no decent food, and now, not even any Senator.

In the two weeks since their arrival she had reluctantly gathered a few vague ideas from the garbled, infrequent radiocasts that the Senator persisted in listening to day in and day out.

Without real comprehension she had watched the Senator growing paler and flabbier every day, till yesterday after two days of radio silence, he had suddenly declared



his intention of making this ridiculous "reconnaissance" and left.

She had every confidence in her own ability to survive any man-made disaster, whoever the authors. The inborn chameleon-like ability for protective coloration had carried her safely so far as she fought her way up from the purlieus of South Clark Street through the varied strata of society, to the roccoco plushiness of the Senator's apartment.

Now she lifted the mirror of the compact and surveyed herself anxiously. Her hair was still shiny and without too much telltale darkness at the roots; her skin was well madeup.

She paused in her examination, senses suddenly alerted, oppressively aware of the close ranked cedar and hemlock pressing about the tiny cabin.

She felt suddenly very much alone and in some queer way more vulnerable . . . more exposed to

watching eyes. She shivered a little and wished that the Senator would return. At least, he would be someone human.

Her breath caught.

The two had just come into the clearing. They were staring at her with round, unblinking eyes. In the face of their silence and immobility some of her terror fell away. She eyed them with objectivity.

Rather warty . . . but then so had been the grocer's boy. And paunchy, gray-skinned and rather frog-eyed . . . but then, so had been the Senator. And male . . .

Her breasts lifted a little and a sly, secret little smile touched the corners of her mouth.

The shorter one was raising some sort of shiny, tubelike thing. Leila eyed him sidelong and passed a hand over her hair, dropping it to smooth lazily over her hip in a gesture as old as the Cosmos.

The shining tube lowered.

Leila reached for her lipstick.

# MILLION DOLLAR MAYBE

By EVAN HUNTER

*This business of getting the public to buy your magazines has always been a tough problem. For obvious reasons, the "double your money back" gimmick is out; while sending in six covers for a free, genuine disintegrator pistol would only result in blowing somebody into an insurance statistic.*

*Remember Prince Magazine? Some years back they came up with a great idea to boost circulation. Worked out fine, too — except for the small matter of tacking on a cancellation date. . . .*

JON was showing me the illustrations for the June issue when the buzzer on my desk sounded.

"This guy is terrific," he said. "I mean it, Bart, we're lucky we got him at all — and especially for the peanuts we're paying him."

"I still think it's too high," I said. I reached over and snapped down the toggle. "Yes?"

"Mr. Merrian?"

"Yes."

"There's a gentleman here to see you, sir."

"Who?" I asked.

"A Mr. Donald, sir."

"Who?"

"Mr. Donald."

"I don't know any Mr. Donald." I turned to Jon. "You know any Mr. Donald?" He shook his



head, and I turned my face back to the speaker. "Ask him what it's in reference to, will you?"

"Yes, sir."

I tapped the illustration Jon was holding with my forefinger. "You start paying these guys fancy prices, and the next thing you know we'll be out of business."

"Fancy?" Jon protested. "This is half what he gets from the better magazines. Hell, Bart, the only reason he did it for us is because I knew him in college."

"You can't trust artists," I told him. "Next thing you know, this guy will be spreading the good news around. *'Hey, I hit Prince Magazine for five-hundred bucks on an illo. A soft touch, boys. Hop aboard.'* We'll have a steady stream of characters with portfolios under their arms. And you know how often we can afford five-hundred."

"All right, so this is an exception."

"Damn right it is. So stop telling me how terrific the guy is. You got the good illo you were crying for. I expect it to last you for the next five years."

"Holy crow, Bart . . ."

"Mr. Merrian?" a female voice interrupted.

"Yes, I'm still here."

"Mr. Donald said he would like his million dollars."

"Hello?" I said.

"Yes, sir?"

"What did you just say?"

"I said Mr. Donald would like his million dollars."

"Damn it, Jon!" I exploded, "it's started already. I told you, you can't trust these damned artists. Well, I'll put a stop to this foolishness right away." I turned back to the intercom. "Send Mr. Donald in. And tell him to leave his portfolio outside."

"He has no portfolio, sir."

"Send him in anyway." I snapped off the toggle angrily and glared at Jon. Jon shrugged, moving his shoulders in a gesture that said, "I'm only the Art Director here."

I leaned back in my chair and waited for the door to slide open. When it did, a tall, thin man stepped into the room, blinking his eyes against the sunlight that streamed through the blinds. He shielded his eyes with one hand and took three cautious steps toward the desk.

"Mr. Donald?" I asked.

"Yes, sir," he said hesitantly.

"How do you do, sir? I'm Bart Merrian, publisher of *Prince*, and this is Jon Hastings, my Art Director. Have a seat, won't you, sir?"

"Well, thank you. That's awfully nice of you . . . considering."

I watched him cross the room and settle himself in the chair beside my desk. He had black

shaggy eyebrows that all but covered pale, almost violet, eyes. He kept his brows pulled low, so that his eyes showed only occasionally, like dim bulbs behind a darkroom curtain. His nose was thin, slicing down the center of his angular face like a machete slash. His lips were pressed firmly together. He looked like a man with unpleasant business on his mind. He certainly did not look like an artist.

"Well," I said cheerily, "what can we do for you, Mr. Donald?" I was beginning to enjoy this. I felt a little like the executioner putting his basket under the blade of the guillotine.

Mr. Donald smiled briefly, almost bashfully. "I'd like my million dollars," he said.

"Wouldn't we all?" I answered, chuckling a little.

His brows lifted slightly, and there was surprise in his pale eyes. "I guess we would at that," he said. He chuckled, too, and Jon joined in, and we had a short round of laughs until I coughed abruptly and called it to a halt.

"How did you . . . ah . . . intend getting *your* million dollars?" I asked, a pleasant smile on my face.

The brows went up again. "Why, from *Prince*."

"From *Prince*," I repeated. I turned to my Art Director and said meaningfully, "From *Prince*, Jon."

"Yes," Mr. Donald said.

"Yes," I repeated. "And just exactly what for? Would you mind telling us?"

"Not at all," Mr. Donald said, making himself comfortable in his chair. "For the Moon trip, of course."

"Of course," I repeated. I turned to Jon, and then did a small take. "The . . . what?"

Mr. Donald pointed up toward the ceiling with his extended forefinger. "The Moon trip. You know."

"The *Moon* trip? You mean Moon? M-O-O-N? Our satellite? The Moon?"

"Uh-huh," Mr. Donald said, nodding his head.

I leaned over toward Jon and whispered, "Did we run a piece about the Moon lately?" Jon shook his head. "What the hell is this bird talking about?" Jon shook his head again. I sighed and turned back to Mr. Donald.

"Just exactly what did you have in mind about the Moon trip?" I asked, pretending to know what it was all about.

Mr. Donald shrugged bashfully. "Well . . . I been."

"You been? What do you mean?"

Mr. Donald pointed up at the ceiling again. "The Moon. I been."

"Oh-oh," I said.

"Yep," Mr. Donald agreed, nodding.

I looked quickly at Jon, and he

returned my anxious glance. We were both beginning to realize that Mr. Donald was perhaps a little bit removed from his perch on the rocker.

He shrugged again. "So," he said casually, "I just come for the million dollars. If you'll let me have it, I'll be on my way."

"You figure we owe you a million dollars, is that it?"

"Oh, sure," Mr. Donald said.

"Uh . . . why? I mean . . ."

"Guess maybe it was a little before your time," Mr. Donald said. He fished into his wallet and came up with a folded sheet of paper. The paper was glossy, and there was printing on it. I watched him as he placed it on the desk and began unfolding it, portion by portion, section by section. He spread it all out, smoothed it with a browned hand, and then leaned back. "There," he said.

I looked at the sheet of paper, noticing that a rectangular portion had been cut from the bottom of it. I shrugged and shifted my eyes to the top of the sheet.

PRINCE magazine . . . September, 1926.

"Cut it out when the contest was announced," Mr. Donald said.

I looked at the page again. September, 1926. Hell, that was a good twenty-five years ago. I shifted my eyes and studied the page.

ATTENTION—IMPORTANT

## ATTENTION—IMPORTANT ATTENTION

*Now that you have read the preceding article, So You Think You'll Reach The Moon, the publishers of Prince Magazine are ready to make a startling, unprecedented offer.*

I heard a sudden gasp behind me, and I realized that Jon was reading over my shoulder and coming to the same horrible conclusion I myself was reaching. With morbid fascination, I turned back to the frayed page from an ancient copy of our magazine.

*Prince is ready to back up its conclusions with an offer of cold cash! We will pay ONE MILLION DOLLARS (\$1,000,000) ONE MILLION DOLLARS to the first man who reaches the Moon and returns alive.*

I was beginning to feel a little ill. I clutched the top of my desk, and forced myself to read the rest of the page. Mr. Donald watched, a happy grin on his face.

*The rules of the contest are simple:*  
*1 — All contestants must be citizens of the United States of America.*

*2 — The Moon Trip must be made within the next fifty years.*

I was very sick now. I swallowed hard as the print began to blur before my eyes.

*3 — The coupon at the bottom of this page must be mailed to Prince on or before October 15, 1926.*

I looked at the rectangular hunk missing from the bottom of the page, and I knew I was close to death's door.

*4 — Employees or relatives of employees of the Prince Publishing Company are not eligible for entry in this . . .*

"I ain't," Mr. Donald said.

"A relative, you mean," I said weakly.

"Or an employee."

"I didn't think you were."

Mr. Donald stretched leisurely. "Well, can I have the million dollars now?"

"Well . . . uh . . ." I looked hopefully to Jon.

"These things take a little time," Jon said quickly.

"Yes, yes, of course," I added. "A little time."

"Mmmm," Mr. Donald said.

"We . . . we have to check to see that your coupon is on file here," Jon said.

"Of course," I put in.

"It's on file," Mr. Donald said. He fished for his wallet again and came up with a small card. I winced and picked it up from the desk top. It read:

This is to certify that

Miss Amos Donald has

on this 23rd day of  
September, 1926

entered into the Prince Magazine Moon Trip Contest. It is understood that if Mr.

Amos Donald is the first person to reach the Moon and return alive, Prince Magazine will pay to him the sum of one million dollars (\$1,000,000) in United States Currency.

(signed) J. GEOFFREY TRIMBLE  
*Publisher,*  
Prince Magazine

"We would need proof, of course," I said triumphantly, shoving the card across the desk.

"I got proof."

"Well, you bring it in," Jon said shrewdly. "We'll see about the million dollars then."

"Sure," Mr. Donald said, rising. "I'll have it tomorrow."

"We're closed tomorrow," I almost shouted.

"Monday, then. Ain't no rush."

"No rush at all," I agreed enthusiastically.

Mr. Donald started for the door, and it slid open quickly.

"See you, fellas," he called, waving happily.

He stepped out of the room, and the door slid shut behind him. I reached quickly for the buzzer on my desk.

"Yes, sir?"

"Miss Davis, I want the Sep-

tember, 1926 issue of *Prince* immediately!"

"Sir?"

"Goddammit, can't you understand English? The September . . ."

"Yes, sir. Right away, sir."

I snapped off and turned quickly to Jon. He was pacing the floor anxiously, wringing his hands.

"I've heard stories about J.G.," I said. "They say he was a crazy bastard. They say he did anything to sell magazines."

"He couldn't have been *this* crazy," Jon moaned.

"No, no," I agreed. "A million dollars. Oh God, don't let it be true."

"I think it is," Jon wailed. "I think it's true."

The door slid open, and Miss Davis fairly fell into the room, a strand of blonde hair hanging over one eye. "I have it, sir," she beamed.

She held up a small container, and I started to say, "What the hell is . . ."

"Microfilm!" she announced.

"Give it here," I snapped. She handed me the container, and Jon leaped to the wall cabinet, sliding it open and pulling out a portable viewer. He put the viewer on my desk, and I inserted the first strip, peering into the viewplate. It was the cover of the old *Prince*. It showed a man with a bare chest, wrestling with an equally nude alligator. Splashed across the top

of the magazine in bold red letters was the legend: PRINCE OFFERS \$1,000,000 FOR FIRST MAN ON MOON!

I gave a small moan. "It's true," Jon wailed.

"I knew it. I knew it."

"Shall we read the article?"

"What for? It's true, Jon. We're ruined."

"There must be a loophole."

"Let's check that page again." I scanned through the strips until I came to the contest offer page. I removed that from the pile and slipped it into the viewer. It was identical with the one Mr. Donald had shown us.

"There must be a loophole," Jon repeated.

"How? Where?"

Jon narrowed his eyes shrewdly. "There's always a loophole."

I clicked the toggle on the intercom.

"Yes, sir?"

"Get Stein, my lawyer. Tell him to get down here immediately. And check through our files. See if there's anyone still with the firm who was working for J. G. Trimble back in 1926."

"1926, sir?"

"My dear young lady, must I repeat everything to you six times?"

"1926, sir. Yes, sir."

She clicked off, only to come back on again in a few minutes.

"I have Mr. Stein for you, sir."

"I don't want him. Just tell

him to get down here right away."

"Yes, sir."

"What are we going to do?" Jon asked.

"I don't know. Do you suppose this crazy old coot really went to the Moon?"

"Impossible," Jon said firmly. "I'd bet a million dollars no one . . ."

"Please! Please."

"Sorry," Jon murmured.

The buzzer sounded, and I clicked on. "Yes?"

"There's a man working here, sir."

"Fine," I said. "Tell him to keep up the splendid . . ."

"I mean, he's been working here since 1926."

"Oh. Good, what's his name?"

"Malther. Ephraim Malther."

"What department is he in?"

"Shipping."

"How old is he?"

"Eighty-four, sir. He was ready for retirement in 1926, but he elected to stay on."

"And he's in the shipping room?"

"Yes, sir. He's been there since 1926."

Jon opened his eyes wide. "Time he went home for supper, don't you think?"

"Send him in," I said. "On the double."

"Yes, sir."

The shipping room was right

downstairs, and I couldn't understand what took Ephraim Malther so long to climb the flight, especially when I'd specified "on the double." Until I saw him, of course. The door slid open suddenly, and he stood there like a fragile leaf on a sycamore tree. I glanced anxiously at the air circulator, and Jon quickly stabbed his thumb at the "Stop" button, just as the big vent threatened to suck the old man into its maw.

"Mr. Malther?" I asked.

"Yes, sir, Mr. Trimble, sir."

"I'm not Mr. Trimble," I told him. "I'm Mr. Merrian, the new publisher."

"Eh? Would you mind speaking a little louder, Mr. Trimble?"

The old man hobbled closer to the desk.

"I'm not Mr. Trimble," I shouted. My breath caught the old man full in his chest. He staggered backward a few paces from the force, then gripped the top of my desk and pulled himself upright.

"How's that again?" he asked, cocking his head to one side. He had startlingly white hair, and rheumy blue eyes, and an annoying habit of lifting one brow high on his forehead when he spoke.

"Never mind," I bellowed. "What do you know about the Moon trip?"

"Good idea, J.G.," he said. "I thought so in the beginning, and I still think so. One million dol-

lars. Great publicity stunt."

"Please!" I brayed.

"*Gesundheit*," he said, nodding his head.

"The Moon trip," I went on, "what do you know about it? How is the firm protected? How did they expect to raise a million dollars if anyone took them up on it?"

"Took them up on what?"

"The Moon trip."

"Took *who* up?"

"Us. Took us up."

"To the Moon? Shucks, Mr. Trimble, ain't no one gonna reach the Moon. Heck, I'll bet a million doll . . ."

"Never mind," I shouted. "How is the company protected?"

"Fine," he said.

"Fine what? What on earth are you talking about?"

"The company's Detectives. Fine group of magazines. Should do well, Mr. Trimble."

"Oh, for Pete's sake."

"How's that?" He cocked his head to one side again.

"Look, try to understand. Some idiot claims he's reached the Moon. He wants his million dollars. How are we going to pay it to him?"

Ephraim Malther spread his hands wide. "Shucks, Mr. Trimble, the insurance company will take care of that. Ain't nothing to worry about there."

"Of course!" Jon yelled.

I snapped my fingers and then

clasped Malther to my bosom. "Naturally! Old J.G. would never have taken the risk himself. An insurance company! Of course, of course." I released Malther, and he almost fell to the floor. He gathered himself together and I pointed my forefinger at his chest.

"Which one?"

"Which one what, sir?"

"Which insurance company?"

"Oh, Lessee now."

"Think," I prompted.

"Think hard," Jon added.

"Eh?"

"Think!"

Malther sniffed. "Yes, now that you mention it, it does. You got flowers in here?"

I let out an exasperated breath.

"Which insurance company?" Jon asked, taking over.

Malther clapped his hands together. "Derrick and Derrickson. That's who!"

"Thank God," I murmured.

"You may go now, Mr. Malther."

"Sir?"

"I said you may go now."

"Eh?"

"Oh, for the love a . . ."

"Which cover, sir?"

I stepped around the desk and took Malther by the elbow. "Go," I said. "Go. Back to the shipping room. Go. Out. Goodbye." I steered him to the door, and when it slid open, I passed him outside.

"Thank you, Mr. Trimble," he said.

"Not at all."

"Eh?"

I turned back into the room, and the door slid shut on his puzzled face. Jon was already thumbing through the phone directory.

"Here it is," he said. "Derrick and Derrickson, twenty-three branch offices."

"Where's the nearest one?"

"Fifth level, corner of Thirty-Eighth and Park."

"Get on the phone, Jon. Make an appointment. I'm on my way down now."

"Right!" he snapped.

I went to the door and it slid open. I turned and looked at Jon solemnly, and he raised his arm.

"Godspeed, Bart!"

"Amen," I muttered.

The door slid shut behind me.

Peter Derrickson was an impressive looking man in a conservative black tunic. His hair was snow white, and he sported a mustache of the same color under his somewhat bulbous nose.

His pretty redhead secretary ushered me into his spacious office, and he motioned me to a chair near his desk.

"Your Art Director sounded upset," he said in a booming voice, as if he were shouting over a nationwide hookup.

I winced and said, "Well, he's excitable." I had decided on the way over that I was going to play this one cagily. I watched him

now while he pounced on a fat cigar in a box on his desk. He put it between his teeth, chewed off one end, turned, and unceremoniously spit it past my ear. I heard the bitten end whistle by, and I opened my eyes wide in astonishment. Peter Derrickson didn't seem to notice my amazement.

"So," he boomed, "what's your problem, sir?"

"When J. G. Trimble was publisher of Prince Magazine, he took out a policy with your firm," I said.

Derrickson lit his cigar, and clouds of smoke billowed up around his head as he puffed heartily. A stream of smoke found the match, extinguished it. From behind the cloudy layers, his voice boomed, "Lots of people take out policies with our firm."

"This one was for a million dollars."

Derrickson puffed some more, and I tried vainly to see him through the smoke screen.

"Lots of people take out million dollar policies," a voice said from behind the billowing clouds.

"This one was insurance against a trip to the Moon."

A white head popped out of the clouds. "Oh, that damn fool thing."

"Yes," I said.

"I remember. What about it?" Derrickson shouted in his normal voice. His head retreated into the

cloud once more, and I was once again talking to a shifting screen of smoke.

"That's what I wanted to ask you. What about it?"

"That's a good question," Derrickson roared. "I think the policy has lapsed."

"Lapsed?" I inquired weakly.

"Yes, lapsed," Derrickson bel lowed. "I can remember when Trimble came to me with the idea. Hell, sure, I said. Isn't anyone going to reach the Moon in our time, Mr. Trimble. I'll give you a million dollar policy, and I'll consider it a safe risk. That's what I told him."

"And . . . and the policy has lapsed?"

"Yes, I believe so. Fact, I'm sure of it. Trimble stopped paying the premiums. Don't know why. They were ridiculously low."

"H . . . h . . . how low?"

"I just told you," Derrickson shouted. "*Ridiculously* low. You deaf or something, young man?"

"Why, no. I . . . I was just wondering how long ago the policy lapsed."

"I'd say about seven years ago. Why?"

"I just wondered. And . . . would it be possible to pay up the back premiums and put the policy into effect again?"

"I don't know. Why? You worried someone's going to reach the Moon?" For some strange reason, Derrickson thought this was funny.

He started laughing from behind his pile of smoke, and I laughed with him. "Hell, you're as crazy as old Trimble was. He apparently wised up, and that's when he stopped paying the premiums. Hell, son, no one's going to set foot on the Moon in our time."

"You're sure of that?"

"Sure?" he roared. "Sure? Of course, I'm sure."

"Then you'd let us pay up the back premiums and reinstate the policy. You're that sure?"

Derrickson's head popped out of the smoke again, and he pointed at me with his vile-smelling cigar. "Yep. I will."

"Well, that's fine," I said, trying to keep my heart from leaping out of my throat and onto the rug. "How much are the back premiums."

Derrickson leaned back against the smoke, and it swallowed him. "The premiums were ridiculously low. Something like a hundred dollars a year."

"And the policy lapsed seven years ago?"

"That's right. If you want to bring it up to date, you'd have to give us seven hundred dollars. And we'd like the next year's premium paid in advance. Eight hundred total."

"Will you take my check?" I asked, reaching under the flap of my tunic instantly.

"Certainly. But there's no rush."

"Well, I'd like to get it off my

mind. Don't like loose ends."

Derrickson pushed the smoke away from his face now that we were ready to pass the cash across the table. It fled before his big hands, and he said, "Just make it out to Derrick and Derrickson. Eight hundred dollars."

He pressed the button on his intercom and shouted, "Bring in the Prince Magazine records."

"Yes, sir."

He reached into his bottom drawer then, and pulled out a printed form with the words POLICY RENEWAL stamped across the top. He sighed, unscrewed the top of his fountain pen and said, "Soon as I sign this, you'll be fully covered again." He

chuckled loudly. "Against a sudden trip to the Moon."

I shoved the check at him eagerly, nodding. I glanced at my watch. "I wonder if you would sign it as soon as . . ."

"Got to fill in a few items first," he said. "I'll need the records for that."

"Couldn't I give you the information you need?"

"Nope. Need the records." He sucked deeply on his cigar, annoyed when he discovered it was out. He put down the pen, lit the cigar again, and began driving all the oxygen from the room once more. In a few moments, the redhead came in with the records.

"Sir . . ." she started.

"Just a moment, Miss Freeley."



"Shine — shine. Go 'way, boy — ya bother me. Shine!"

She stood by the desk patiently, grinning at me. Derrickson peered through his billowing screen and quickly copied the information he needed.

"There," he said at last. "Now I'll put the old John Han . . ."

"Sir . . ." the redhead said again, and I was beginning to dislike her intently.

"Just a moment, Miss Freeley," Derrickson said. "As I was saying, all it needs now is the old John . . ."

"Sir . . ."

"Hancock!" he roared. "What the hell is it, Miss Freeley?"

I stared at the pen poised over the dotted line.

"Couldn't you sign . . ."

"I'm sorry, sir," the redhead said, "but I didn't mean to interrupt. It's just that the most wonderful thing has happened!"

"What's that?" Derrickson said. He put the pen on the paper, a small dot of ink appearing under the point. He looked up expectantly.

"A man has just returned from the Moon!" the redhead said excitedly.

Derrickson clamped down on his cigar, and lifted the pen as if it were on fire. "WHAT?" he boomed.

"Yes, sir, it's in all the papers and on all the broadcasts. Amos Donald is his name. He's the cutest man you ever . . ."

Derrickson turned his chair to-

wards me slowly, great plumes of smoke streaming from his nose and the corners of his mouth.

"You — knew — this," he said slowly.

"No, Mr. Derrickson, I didn't," I said brightly. "Comes as a complete surprise to me. Comes as a . . ."

"Get out!" he screamed. "Get out of here before I . . ."

"But Mr. Derrickson . . ."

"Get out, you cheap four-flusher!"

"But . . ."

"Get out you . . . you . . . grifter!"

The office walls were threatening to bulge outward from the smoke pressing against them. I got up quickly and headed for the door, and behind me the redhead asked, "Did I say something, Mr. Derrickson?"

She certainly had.

Amos Donald brought proof the next day. He also brought photographers and newspapermen, and the offices of *Prince* were more crowded than they'd been in many a moo . . . many a day.

He lay the items on the desk one by one.

"Exhibit A," he said. "Gypsum. Taken from the Moon."

"How do we know?" Jon asked.

"Have your scientists test it. Ain't no atmosphere on the Moon. No erosion. No weathering. Have them test it against Earth speci-

mens. Absolutely authentic."

"Exhibit A," I said wearily.

"Exhibit B: silver. Got it on the Moon, too." He plunked a piece of silver as big as my head onto the desk.

"Exhibit B," Jon said.

Mr. Donald lifted a bag. It was a big bag, and he needed both hands to raise it to the desk. Abruptly, he turned it over, spilling the contents onto the mahogany.

"Exhibit C: Moon pumice. Got it from Archimedes. Genuine article, believe me."

I looked at Jon, and Jon looked at me. We were both thinking of the \$21,456.31 in *Prince's* treasury. That was a far cry from a million dollars. A far, far cry.

Mr. Donald opened a suitcase and brought out a bulky nylon and rubber contrivance. "Space suit I wore on the Moon," he said quietly. The reporters began to buzz, and a few flash guns flashed. I looked at the space suit, and at the helmet resting in the deep suitcase.

"Got two of 'em," Mr. Donald said. "One's a spare. Got that one over in the ship."

"The what?" I asked.

"Why, the ship. The one I went up with," Mr. Donald explained. "Had to have a ship, you know."

"Sure," Jon said, nodding, "he had to have a ship, Bart."

"Yes, of course."

"I was saving that 'til last,"

Mr. Donald said. "That's exhibit R."

"R?"

"Oh sure. I got lots more to show you."

He started to show us, and the photographers had a field day. By the time he finished, there were more mineral and rock specimens on my desk than in the Geology Department of the Museum of Natural History. He claimed he got them all on the Moon. He also claimed that some of the minerals were compounds peculiar to the Moon's airless, waterless nature. He left with a crowd of reporters behind him, while Jon and I desperately called in the scientists who had volunteered to examine the loot.

Jon clapped me on the shoulder and said, "We're in this to the end, Bart. Together."

"I appreciate that, old man," I told him.

I thought I saw a tear in Jon's eye, but I wasn't sure.

There were tears in mine, though, when the scientists delivered their reports.

Their spokesman sniffed the air like a beagle, and then announced, "There can be no question. We have seen no specimens such as these on Earth. Coupled with the photographs Mr. Donald was good enough to . . ."

"The what? What? What did you say?"

"Photographs," the spokesman

said. "The ones Mr. Donald took on the Moon. He was good enough to send them to us directly. Figured they'd help us reach a fair decision. Unquestionably valid, too. Our most powerful telescopes could never have got such closeups. Coupled with these photographs, as I was saying, there can be no reasonable doubt that Mr. Donald has indeed been to the Moon." The spokesman cleared his throat. "We . . . ah . . . have a suggestion to make, Mr. Merrian."

"What's that?"

"Pay the man his million dollars."

Mr. Donald saved the spaceship for last. We insisted on seeing that privately, without the invasion of the press. He agreed because he was closer to the million dollars now. Besides, he wanted to put away the space suit and the assorted items that had served as exhibits. When he'd done that,

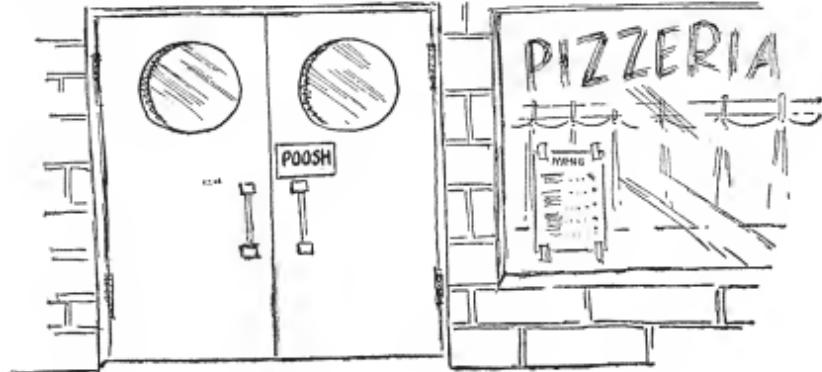
hanging the space suit alongside the spare in a locker, and stowing the specimens, he showed us around the control room. "Only one of its kind in the world," he said proudly. "Took me twenty years to build it. Ain't another like it."

"It looks complicated," I said.

"Ain't," Mr. Donald answered. "Simplest thing in the world. Built an orbit calculator right into it, you see. Only wanted it to take me one place, and that was the Moon. So all I got to do is set the year, and the day of the month with these knobs here, and it automatically figures just where the Moon is, and what the orbit to take the ship there would have to be. Then all I do is press that there firing stud, and the thing just goes up." He lifted his forefinger. "Right to the Moon."

"It was easy then," Jon said.

"Easy as pie. Be just as easy to get to all the planets with this baby. Anyone could figure it."



"Well," I said, "I guess he gets the million bucks."

"I guess so," Jon agreed wearily.

"We'd better get back to the office, Jon. If you'll contact us tomorrow, Mr. Donald, we'll have your check waiting for you."

"You're sure now?"

"Oh yes," I said. I grinned feebly. "Why not? You've convinced us."

Mr. Donald seemed happy now. He led us out of the control room and down the ramp. The rocket site was deserted, and blackness covered the sky as we walked toward the company's automobile.

"Sure lonely out here," Jon said.

"Has to be," Mr. Donald answered. "Blastoff, you know. Can't have people injured by the jet trail."

"Naturally not," I said.

"Uhm," Jon agreed.

We rode back to the city in silence.

At the office, Mr. Donald stepped out of the car. "Hope you fellows have that check tomorrow," he said. "I aim to make another trip up there. Figure maybe I'll hop to Mars from the Moon. Need supplies, though. Plenty of them. Part of the check will go for that."

"What about fuel?" Jon asked.

"Oh, got my tanks full already. I can make that next trip soon as I get the money to stock up."

I thought of the \$21,456.31 in

our paltry bank account, and I wondered how much supplies that would buy for Mr. Donald. Jon looked at me, and I knew he was thinking the same thing.

"Well, good night, Mr. Donald," I said.

"Night, fellas. See you tomorrow."

"Sure," Jon called after him.

Jon's eyes met mine for an instant, and we grinned at each other.

"But are we doing the right thing?" Jon asked, two days later.

"Have we got a million bucks?"

"After the spending we did? Hell, we're lucky if we have a thousand."

"Then we're doing the right thing," I said simply.

"I guess so."

"When in doubt, run."

"Suppose he catches up."

"Never," I said. "He's an old man, more or less. Besides, we can go to a great many places."

"And we can always start another magazine," Jon said hopefully. "Somewhere."

"Sure. Nothing to worry about. We've got enough to last."

We sat back in the seats and stretched luxuriously.

There was a hold full of supplies, and tanks full of fuel, and Mr. Donald's space ship handled like a dream.

We sat back and watched the stars and the approaching Moon.



# THE BUILDER

By PHILIP K. DICK

*Are you troubled with some type of compulsion? If so, do you hide it from the eyes of the world and suffer in silence, or do you trot on down to the local psychiatrist for a mental trip back to infancy in hopes of getting rid of the thing? You see, you've got to do one or the other, or risk having people tap their foreheads significantly as you walk by.*

*Take Mr. Elwood, for example. A fine, hardworking man, good to his family and respected in his neighborhood. Then one day he hauled in a stack of lumber and got out a hammer and some nails — and lost everything — except his life. . . .*

E. J. ELWOOD!" Liz said anxiously. "You aren't listening to anything we're saying. And you're not eating a bite. What in the world is the matter with you? Sometimes I just can't understand you."

For a long time there was no response. Ernest Elwood continued to stare past them, staring

out the window at the semi-darkness beyond, as if hearing something they did not hear. At last he sighed, drawing himself up in his chair, almost as if he were going to say something. But then his elbow knocked against his coffee cup and he turned instead to steady the cup, wiping spilled brown coffee from its side.

"Sorry," he murmured. "What were you saying?"

"Eat, dear," his wife said. She glanced at the two boys as she spoke to see if they had stopped eating, also. "You know, I go to a great deal of trouble to fix your food." Bob, the older boy, was going right ahead, cutting his liver and bacon carefully into bits. But sure enough, little Toddy had put down his knife and fork as soon as E. J. had, and now he, too, was sitting silently, staring down at his plate.

"See?" Liz said. "You're not setting a very good example for the boys. Eat up your food. It's getting cold. You don't want to eat cold liver, do you? There's nothing worse than liver when it gets cold and the fat all over the bacon hardens. It's harder to digest cold fat than anything else in the world. Especially lamb fat. They say a lot of people can't eat lamb fat at all. Dear, please eat."

Elwood nodded. He lifted his fork and spooned up some peas and potatoes, carrying them to his mouth. Little Toddy did the same, gravely and seriously, a small edition of his father.

"Say," Bob said. "We had an atomic bomb drill at school today. We lay under the desks."

"Is that right?" Liz said.

"But Mr. Pearson our science teacher says that if they drop a bomb on us the whole town'll be

demolished, so I can't see what good getting under the desk will do. I think they ought to realize what advances science has made. There are bombs now that'll destroy miles, leaving nothing standing."

"You sure know a lot," Toddy muttered.

"Oh, shut up."

"Boys," Liz said.

"It's true," Bob said earnestly. "A fellow I know is in the Marine Corp Reserve and he says they have new weapons that will destroy wheat crops and poison water supplies. It's some kind of crystals."

"Heavens," Liz said.

"They didn't have things like that in the last war. Atomic development came almost at the end without there really being an opportunity to make use of it on a full scale." Bob turned to his father. "Dad, isn't that true? I'll bet when you were in the Army you didn't have any of the fully atomic —"

Elwood threw down his fork. He pushed his chair back and stood up. Liz stared up in astonishment at him, her cup half raised. Bob's mouth hung open, his sentence unfinished. Little Toddy said nothing.

"Dear, what's the matter?" Liz said.

"I'll see you later."

They gazed after him in amazement as he walked away from the

table, out of the dining room. They heard him go into the kitchen and pull open the back door. A moment later the back door slammed behind him.

"He went out in the back yard," Bob said. "Mom, was he always like this? Why does he act so funny? It isn't some kind of war psychosis he got in the Philippines, is it? In the First World War they called it shell shock, but now they know it's a form of war psychosis. Is it something like that?"

"Eat your food," Liz said, red spots of anger burning in her cheeks. She shook her head. "Darn that man. I just can't imagine —"

The boys ate their food.

It was dark out in the back yard. The sun had set and the air was cool and thin, filled with dancing specks of night insects. In the next yard Joe Hunt was working, raking leaves from under his cherry tree. He nodded to Elwood.

Elwood walked slowly down the path, across the yard toward the garage. He stopped, his hands in his pockets. By the garage something immense and white loomed up, a vast pale shape in the evening gloom. As he stood gazing at it a kind of warmth began to glow inside him. It was a strange warmth, something like pride, a little pleasure mixed in, and —

And excitement. Looking at the boat always made him excited. Even when he was first starting on it he had felt the sudden race of his heart, the shaking of his hands, sweat on his face.

His boat. He grinned, walking closer. He reached up and thumped the solid side. What a fine boat it was, and coming along damn well. Almost done. A lot of work had gone into that, a lot of work and time. Afternoons off from work, Sundays, and even sometimes early in the morning before work.

That was best, early in the morning, with the bright sun shining down and the air good-smelling and fresh, and everything wet and sparkling. He liked that time best of all, and there was no one else up to bother him and ask him questions. He thumped the solid side again. A lot of work and material, all right. Lumber and nails, sawing and hammering and bending. Of course, Toddy had helped him. He certainly couldn't have done it alone; no doubt of that. If Toddy hadn't drawn the lines on the boards and —

"Hey," Joe Hunt said.

Elwood started, turning. Joe was leaning on the fence, looking at him. "Sorry," Elwood said. "What did you say?"

"Your mind was a million miles away," Hunt said. He took a puff on his cigar. "Nice night."

"Yes."

"That's some boat you got there, Elwood."

"Thanks," Elwood murmured. He walked away from it, back toward the house. "Goodnight, Joe."

"How long is it you been working on that boat?" Hunt reflected. "Seems like about a year in all, doesn't it? About twelve months. You sure put a lot of time and effort into it. Seems like every time I see you you're carting lumber back here and sawing and hammering away."

Elwood nodded, moving toward the back door.

"You even got your kids working. At least, the little tyke. Yes, it's quite a boat." Hunt paused. "You sure must be going to go quite a way with it, by the size of it. Now just exactly where was it you told me you're going? I forgot."

There was silence.

"I can't hear you, Elwood," Hunt said. "Speak up. A boat that big, you must be—"

"Lay off."

Hunt laughed easily. "What's the matter, Elwood? I'm just having a little harmless fun, pulling your leg. But seriously, where are you going with that? You going to drag it down to the beach and float it? I know a guy has a little sailboat he fits onto a trailer cart, hooks it up to his car. He drives down to the yacht harbor every week or so. But my

God, you can't get that big thing onto a trailer. You know, I heard about a guy built a boat in his cellar. Well, he got done and you know what he discovered? He discovered that the boat was so big when he tried to get it out the door —"

Liz Elwood came to the back door, snapping on the kitchen light and pushing the door open. She stepped out onto the grass, her arms folded.

"Good evening, Mrs. Elwood," Hunt said, touching his hat. "Sure a nice night."

"Good evening." Liz turned to E. J. "For heaven's sake, are you going to come in?" Her voice was low and hard.

"Sure." Elwood reached out listlessly for the door. "I'm coming in. Goodnight, Joe."

"Goodnight," Hunt said. He watched the two of them go inside. The door closed, the light went off. Hunt shook his head. "Funny guy," he murmured. "Getting funnier all the time. Like he's in a different world. Him and his boat!"

He went indoors.

"She was just eighteen," Jack Fredericks said, "but she sure knew what it was all about."

"Those southern girls are that way," Charlie said. "It's the climate. They ripen faster. It's like fruit, nice soft, ripe, slightly damp fruit."

"There's a passage in Hemingway like that," Ann Pike said. "I can't remember what it's from. He compares a —"

"But the way they talk," Charlie said. "Who can stand the way those southern girls talk?"

"What's the matter with the way they talk?" Jack demanded. "They talk different, but you get used to it."

"Why can't they talk right?"

"What do you mean?"

"They talk like — colored people."

"It's because they all come from the same region," Ann said.

"Are you saying this girl was colored?" Jack said.

"No, of course not. Finish your pie." Charlie looked at his wrist watch. "Almost one. We have to be getting on back to the office."

"I'm not finished eating," Jack said. "Hold on!"

"You know, there's a lot of colored people moving into my area," Ann said. "There's a real estate sign up on a house about a block from me. 'All races welcomed'. I almost fell over dead when I saw it."

"What did you do?"

"I didn't do anything. What can you do?"

"You know, if you work for the Government they can put a colored man or a Chinese next to you," Jack said, "and you can't do anything about it."

"Except quit."

"It interferes with your right to work," Charlie said. "How can you work like that? Answer me."

"There's too many pinks in the Government," Jack said. "That's how they got that, about hiring people for Government jobs without looking to see what race they belong to. During WPA days, when Harry Hopkins was in."

"You know where Harry Hopkins was born?" Ann said. "He was born in Russia."

"That was Sidney Hillman," Jack said.

"It's all the same," Charlie said. "They all ought to be sent back there."

Ann looked curiously at Ernest Elwood. He was sitting quietly, reading his newspaper, not saying anything. The cafeteria was alive with movement and noise. Everyone was eating and talking, coming and going, back and forth.

"E. J., are you all right?" Ann said.

"Yes."

"He's reading about the White Sox," Charlie said. "He has that intent look. Say, you know, I took my kids to the game the other night, and —"

"Come on," Jack said, standing up. "We have to get back."

They all rose. Elwood folded his newspaper up silently, putting it into his pocket.

"Say, you're not talking much," Charlie said to him as they went

up the aisle. Elwood glanced up.  
"Sorry."

"I've been meaning to ask you something. Do you want to come over Saturday night for a little game? You haven't played with us for a hell of a long time."

"Don't ask him," Jack said, paying for his meal at the cash register. "He always wants to play queer games like deuces wild, baseball, spit in the ocean —"

"Straight poker for me," Charlie said. "Come on, Elwood. The more the better. Have a couple of beers, chew the fat, get away from the wife, eh?" He grinned.

"One of these days we're going to have a good old stag party," Jack said, pocketing his change. He winked at Elwood. "You know the kind I mean? We get some gals together, have a little show —" He made a motion with his hand.

Elwood moved off. "Maybe. I'll think it over." He paid for his lunch. Then he went outside, out onto the bright sidewalk. The others were still inside, waiting for Ann. She had gone into the powder room.

Suddenly Elwood turned and walked hurriedly down the sidewalk, away from the cafeteria. He turned the corner quickly and found himself on Cedar Street, in front of a television store. Shoppers and clerks out on their lunch hour pushed and crowded past

him, laughing and talking, bits of their conversations rising and falling around him like waves of the sea. He stepped into the doorway of the television shop and stood, his hands in his pockets, like a man hiding from the rain.

What was the matter with him? Maybe he should go see a doctor. The sounds, the people, everything bothered him. Noise and motion everywhere. He wasn't sleeping enough at night. Maybe it was something in his diet. And he was working so damn hard out in the yard. By the time he went to bed at night he was exhausted. Elwood rubbed his forehead. People and sounds, talking, streaming past him, endless shapes moving in the streets and stores.

In the window of the television shop a big television set blinked and winked a soundless program, the images leaping merrily. Elwood watched passively. A woman in tights was doing acrobatics, first a series of splits, then cartwheels and spins. She walked on her hands for a moment, her legs waving above her, smiling at the audience. Then she disappeared and a brightly dressed man came on, leading a dog.

Elwood looked at his watch. Five minutes to one. He had five minutes to get back to the office. He went back onto the sidewalk and looked around the corner. Ann and Charlie and Jack were no place to be seen. They had

gone on. Elwood walked slowly along, past the stores, his hands in his pockets. He stopped for a moment in front of the ten cent store, watching the milling women pushing and shoving around the imitation jewelry counters, touching things, picking them up, examining them. In the window of a drugstore he stared at an ad for athlete's foot, some kind of a powder being sprinkled between two cracked and blistered toes. He crossed the street.

On the other side he paused to look at a display of women's clothing, skirts and blouses and wool sweaters. In a color photograph a handsomely dressed girl was removing her blouse to show the world her elegant bra. Elwood passed on. The next window was suitcases, luggage and trunks.

Luggage. He stopped, frowning. Something wandered through his mind, some loose vague thought, too nebulous to catch. He felt, suddenly, a deep inner urgency. He examined his watch. Ten past one. He was late. He hurried to the corner and stood waiting impatiently for the light to change. A handful of men and women pressed past him, moving out to the curb to catch an oncoming bus. Elwood watched the bus. It halted, its doors opening. The people pushed onto it. Suddenly Elwood joined them, stepping up the steps of the bus. The doors closed behind him as he fished

out change from his pocket.

A moment later he took his seat, next to an immense old woman with a child on her lap. Elwood sat quietly, his hands folded, staring ahead and waiting, as the bus moved off down the street, moving toward the residential district.

When he got home there was no one there. The house was dark and cool. He went to the bedroom and got his old clothes from the closet. He was just going out into the back yard when Liz appeared in the driveway, her arms loaded with groceries.

"E. J.!" she said. "What's the matter? Why are you home?"

"I don't know. I took some leave. It's all right."

Liz put her packages down on the fence. "For heaven's sake," she said irritably. "You frightened me." She stared at him intently. "You took *leave*?"

"Yes."

"How much does that make, this year? How much leave have you taken in all?"

"I don't know."

"You don't know? Well, is there any left?"

"Left for what?"

Liz stared at him. Then she picked up her packages and went inside the house, the back door banging after her. Elwood frowned. What was the matter? He went on into the garage and

began to drag lumber and tools out onto the lawn, beside the boat.

He gazed up at it. It was square, big and square, like some enormous solid packing crate. Lord, but it was solid. He had put endless beams into it. There was a covered cabin with a big window, the roof tarred over. Quite a boat.

He began to work. Presently Liz came out of the house. She crossed the yard silently, so that he did not notice her until he came to get some large nails.

"Well?" Liz said.

Elwood stopped for a moment. "What is it?"

Liz folded her arms.

Elwood became impatient. "What is it? Why are you looking at me?"

"Did you really take more leave? I can't believe it. You really came home again to work on — on that."

Elwood turned away.

"Wait." She came up beside him. "Don't walk off from me. Stand still."

"Be quiet. Don't shout."

"I'm not shouting. I want to talk to you. I want to ask you something. May I? May I ask you something? You don't mind talking to me?"

Elwood nodded.

"Why?" Liz said, her voice low and intense. "Why? Will you tell me that? Why?"

"Why what?"

"That. That — that thing. What is it for? Why are you here in the yard in the middle of the day? For a whole year it's been like this. At the table last night, all of a sudden you got up and walked out. Why? What's it all for?"

"It's almost done," Elwood murmured. "A few more licks here and there and it'll be —"

"And then what?" Liz came around in front of him, standing in his path. "And then what? What are you going to do with it? Sell it? Float it? All the neighbors are laughing at you. Everybody in the block knows —" Her voice broke suddenly. "— Knows about you, and this. The kids at school make fun of Bob and Toddy. They tell them their father is — That he's —"

"That he's crazy?"

"Please, E. J. Tell me what it's for. Will you do that? Maybe I can understand. You never told me. Wouldn't it help? Can't you even do that?"

"I can't," Elwood said.

"You can't! Why not?"

"Because I don't know," Elwood said. "I don't know what it's for. Maybe it isn't for anything."

"But if it isn't for anything why do you work on it?"

"I don't know. I like to work on it. Maybe it's like whittling." He waved his hand impatiently.

"I've always had a workshop of some kind. When I was a kid I used to build model airplanes. I have tools. I've always had tools."

"But why do you come home in the middle of the day?"

"I get restless."

"Why?"

"I—I hear people talking, and it makes me uneasy. I want to get away from them. There's something about it all, about them. Their ways. Maybe I have claustrophobia."

"Shall I call Doctor Evans and make an appointment?"

"No. No, I'm all right. Please, Liz, get out of the way so I can work. I want to finish."

"And you don't even know what it's for." She shook her head. "So all this time you've been working without knowing why. Like some animal that goes out at night and fights, like a cat on the back fence. You leave your work and us to—"

"Get out of the way."

"Listen to me. You put down that hammer and come inside. You're putting your suit on and going right back to the office. Do you hear? If you don't I'm never going to let you inside the house again. You can break down the door if you want, with your hammer. But it'll be locked for you from now on, if you don't forget that boat and go back to work."

There was silence.

"Get out of the way," Elwood said. "I have to finish."

Liz stared at him. "You're going on?" The man pushed past her. "You're going to go ahead? There's something wrong with you. Something wrong with your mind. You're —"

"Stop," Elwood said, looking past her. Liz turned.

Toddy was standing silently in the driveway, his lunch pail under his arm. His small face was grave and solemn. He did not say anything to them.

"Tod!" Liz said. "Is it that late already?"

Toddy came across the grass to his father. "Hello, boy," Elwood said. "How was school?"

"Fine."

"I'm going in the house," Liz said. "I meant it, E. J. Remember that I meant it."

She went up the walk. The back door slammed behind her.

Elwood sighed. He sat down on the ladder leading up the side of the boat and put his hammer down. He lit a cigarette and smoked silently. Toddy waiting without speaking.

"Well, boy?" Elwood said at last. "What do you say?"

"What do you want done, dad?"

"Done?" Elwood smiled. "Well, there's not too much left. A few things here and there. We'll be through, soon. You might look around for boards we didn't

nail down on the deck." He rubbed his jaw. "Almost done. We've been working a long time. You could paint, if you want. I want to get the cabin painted. Red, I think. How would red be?"

"Green."

"Green? All right. There's some green porch paint in the garage. Do you want to start stirring it up?"

"Sure," Toddy said. He headed toward the garage.

Elwood watched him go. "Toddy —"

The boy turned. "Yes?"

"Toddy, wait." Elwood went slowly toward him. "I want to ask you something."

"What is it, dad?"

"You — you don't mind helping me, do you? You don't mind working on the boat?"

Toddy looked up gravely into

his father's face. He said nothing. For a long time the two of them gazed at each other.

"Okay!" Elwood said suddenly. "You run along and get the paint started."

Bob came swinging along the driveway with two of the kids from the junior high school. "Hi, dad," Bob called, grinning. "Say, how's it coming?"

"Fine," Elwood said.

"Look," Bob said to his pals, pointing to the boat. "You see that? You know what that is?"

"What is it?" one of them said.

Bob opened the kitchen door. "That's an atomic powered sub." He grinned, and the two boys grinned. "It's full of Uranium 235. Dad's going all the way to Russia with it. When he gets through, there won't be a thing left of Moscow."



The boys went inside, the door slamming behind them.

Elwood stood looking up at the boat. In the next yard Mrs. Hunt stopped for a moment with taking down her washing, looking at him and the big square hull rising above him.

"Is it really atomic powered, Mr. Elwood?" she said.

"No."

"What makes it run, then? I don't see any sails. What kind of motor is in it? Steam?"

Elwood bit his lip. Strangely, he had never thought of that part. There was no motor in it, no motor at all. There were no sails, no boiler. He had put no engine into it, no turbines, no fuel. Nothing. It was a wood hull, an immense box, and that was all. He had never thought of what would make it go, never in all the time he and Toddy had worked on it.

Suddenly a torrent of despair descended over him. There was no engine, nothing. It was not a boat, it was only a great mass of wood and tar and nails. It would never go, never leave the yard. Liz was right: he was like some animal going out into the yard at night, to fight and kill in the darkness, to struggle dimly, without sight or understanding, equally blind, equally pathetic.

What had he built it for? He did not know. Where was it going? He did not know that either. What would make it run? How

would he get it out of the yard? What was it all for, to build without understanding, darkly, like a creature in the night?

Toddy came from the garage, stirring a quart can of paint. He nodded to his father and set the can down by the ladder. Then he went back to get the brush.

Toddy had worked along side him, the whole time. Why had *he* worked? Did he know? Did the boy know what the boat was for, why they were building? Toddy had never asked. The boy had never asked because he trusted his father to know.

But he did not know. He, the father, he did not know either, and soon it would be done, finished, ready. And then what? Soon Toddy would lay down his paint brush, cover the last can of paint, put away the nails, the scraps of wood, hang the saw and hammer up in the garage again. And *then* he would ask, ask the question he had never asked before but which must come finally.

And he could not answer him.

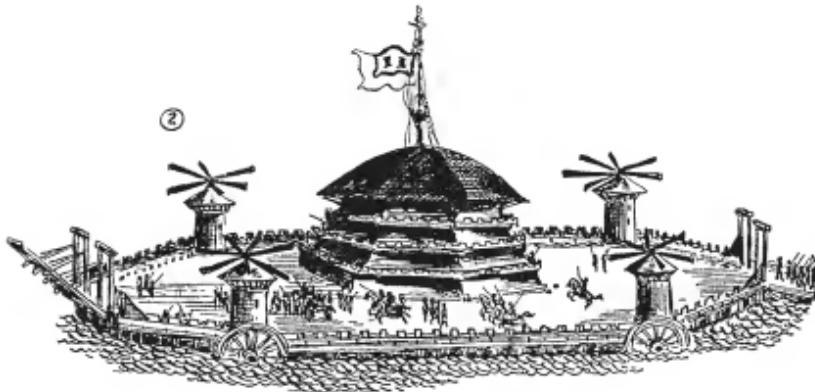
Elwood stood, staring up at it, the great hulk they had built, struggling to understand. Why had he worked? What was it all for? When would he know? Would he ever know? For an endless time he stood there, staring up.

It was not until the first great black drops of rain began to splash about him that he understood.

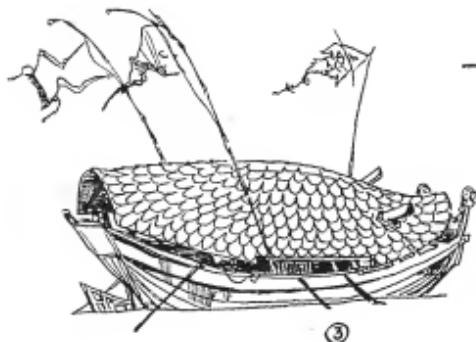
# A PORTFOLIO

By Ernest Schroeder

*Please turn to page 73 for further information concerning the early inventions shown below.*



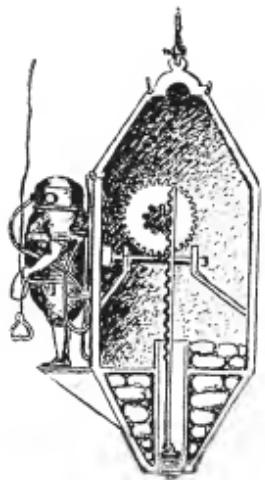
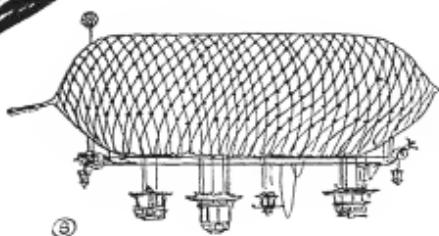
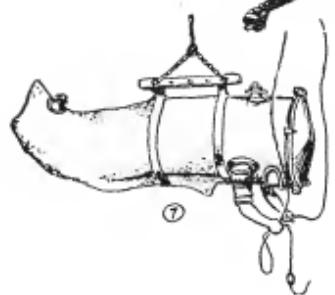
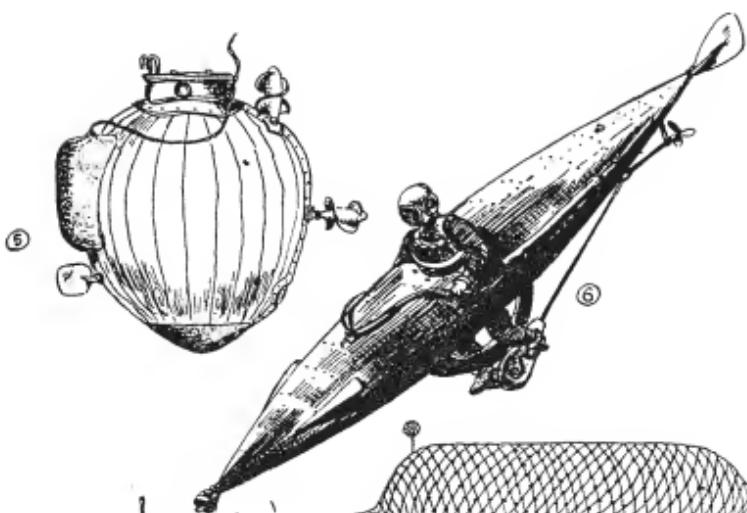
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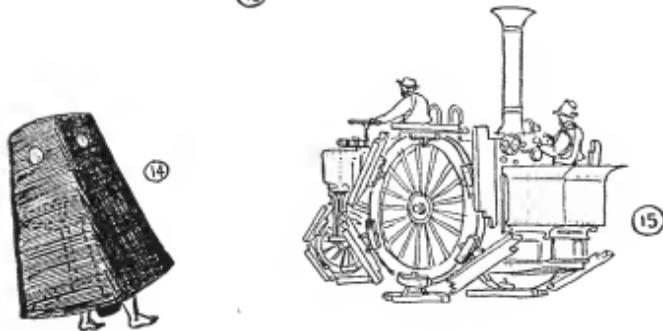
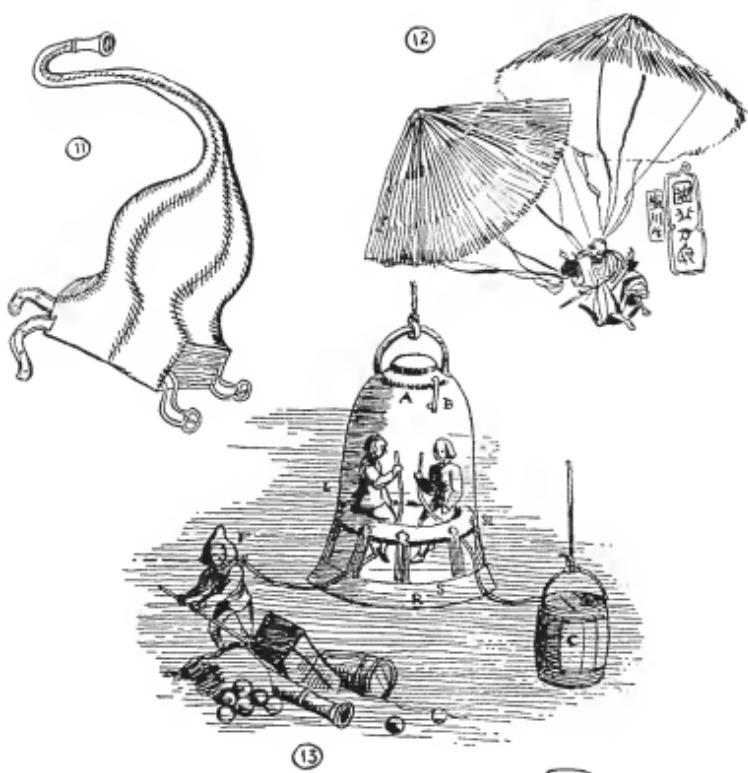


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④





1. Not the Mad Hatter in a rain coat nor a spaceman off to Mars. This is an early nineteenth-century diving suit. (Illustration on inside cover)
2. Napoleon's idea of a superdreadnought. He planned to invade England in this 600-foot canoe. It carried 500 cannon and 15,000 men — or, rather, it didn't because it sank at St. Maloës in 1798.
3. This iron-clad saw service in Korean waters. Helped to turn back a Japanese invasion. The year — 1200 A.D.
4. The first schnorkel — a hose held above water by a row boat. 1856.
5. Bushnell's "Turtle" — a 1776 submarine used unsuccessfully against the British fleet in New York harbor. It didn't hurt the British, but they couldn't hurt the "Turtle" either.
6. A sort of undersea bicycle. The diver could pedal around and take in the sights.
7. The brain-child of a hardy inventor named John Lethridge, and it worked, as long as the diver came up for air once in a while.
8. China claims the invention of the first passenger-carrying balloon. Watchers, equipped with trumpets, shouted the latest weather reports to the pilot from hilltops along the route.
9. The peerless Leonardo Da Vinci designed this forerunner of the modern tank. It was never built, however.
10. An 1850 diving unit in which the diver took his cylinder of air down with him.
11. Another diving unit. The sea apparently offered early inventors their greatest challenge.
12. Chinese Emperor Shun, 2258-2208 B.C., was the first human to descend in a parachute. This one. He landed unhurt.
13. An ancient diving bell.
14. A perambulating diving bell. The diver walked out into deep water.
15. Tuxford's traction-engine. 1857. One of the first successful applications of the caterpillar tread.

# The PIN

BY ROBERT BLOCH

*Do we live and die by some great Cosmic law? Or do we survive or perish by vague and casual chance involving things no more awesome than a pin and a telephone book?*

SOMEHOW, somewhere, someone would find out. It was inevitable. In this case, the *someone* was named Barton Stone. The *somewhere* was an old loft over a condemned office building on Bleeker Street.

And the *somewhat* —

Barton Stone came there early one Monday morning as the sun shone yellow and cold over the huddled rooftops. He noted the mass of the surrounding buildings, rearranged them into a more pleasing series of linear units, gauged his perspective, evaluated the tones and shadings of sunlight and shadow with his artist's eye. There was a picture here, he told himself, if only he could find it.

Unfortunately, he wasn't looking for a picture. He had plenty of subjects in mind; right now, he was looking for a place in which to paint. He wanted a studio, wanted it quickly. And it must





be cheap. Running water and north light were luxuries beyond his present consideration. As for other aesthetic elements, such as cleanliness — Stone shrugged as he mounted the stairs, his long fingers trailing dust from the rickety railing.

There was dust everywhere, for this was the domain of dust, of darkness and desertion. He stumbled upwards into the silence.

The first two floors of the building were entirely empty, just as Freed had told him. And the stairs to the loft were at the end of the hall on the second floor.

"You'll have it all to yourself," the rental agent had promised. "But remember to stay in the loft. Nobody'd ever bother looking up there. Damned inspectors come around, they keep telling us to raze the building. But the floor's safe enough. All you got to do is keep out of sight — why, you could hide out there for years without being caught. It's no palace, but take a look and see what you think. For twenty bucks a month, you can't go wrong."

Stone nodded now as he walked down the debris-littered hall towards the loft stairs. He couldn't go wrong. He sensed, suddenly and with utter certainty, that this was the place he'd been searching for during all of these frustratingly futile weeks. He moved up the stairs with inevitable —

Then he heard the sound.

Call it a thud, call it a thump, call it a muffled crash. The important thing was that it sounded from above, from the deserted loft.

Stone paused on the second step from the top. There was someone in the loft. *For twenty bucks a month you can't go wrong — but you could hide out there for years without being caught.*

Barton Stone was not a brave man. He was only a poor artist, looking for a cheap loft or attic to use as a studio. But his need was great; great enough to impel him upwards, carry him to the top of the loft stairs and down the short corridor leading to the entry.

He moved quietly, now, although there was thunder in his chest. He tiptoed delicately towards the final door, noted the overhead transom; noted, too, the small crate in the corner against the wall.

There was silence beyond the door, and silence in the hall now as he carefully lifted the crate and placed it so that he could mount the flat top and peer over the open transom.

No sense being melodramatic, he told himself. On the other hand, there was no sense rushing in — Barton Stone was not a fool and he didn't want to become an angel.

He looked over the transom.  
The loft was huge. A dusty sky-

light dominated the ceiling, and enough light filtered through to bathe the room in sickly luminescence. Stone could see everything, everything.

He saw the books, stacked man-high; row after row of thick books. He saw the sheafs bulked between the books; pile after pile of sheafs. He saw the papers rising in solid walls from the floor. He saw the table in the center of the loft—the table, bulwarked on three sides by books and sheafs and papers all tossed together in toppling towers.

And he saw the man.

The man sat behind the table, back to the wall, surrounded on three sides by the incredible array of printed matter. He sat there, head down, and peered at the pages of an opened book. He never looked up, never made a sound, just sat there and stared.

Stone stared back. He understood the source of the noise, now; one of the books had fallen from its stack. But nothing else made sense to him. His eyes sought clues, his mind sought meaning.

The man was short, fat, middle-aged. His hair was graying into white, his face lining into wrinkles. He wore a dirty khaki shirt and trousers and he might have been an ex-GI, a tramp, a fugitive from justice, an indigent book-dealer, an eccentric millionaire.

Stone moved from the realm of might-have-been to a considera-

tion of what he actually saw. The little fat man was riffling through the pages of a fat, paper-bound book which could easily be mistaken for a telephone directory. He turned the pages, apparently at random, with his left hand. Very well, then; he was left-handed.

Or was he? His right hand moved across the table, raised and poised so that the sunlight glittered in a thin line of silver against the object he held.

It was a pin; a long, silver pin. Stone stared at it. The man was staring at it too. Stone's gaze held curiosity. The little fat man's gaze held utter loathing and, more than that, a sort of horrified fascination.

Another sound broke the stillness. The little man sighed. It was a deep sigh that became, with abrupt and hideous clarity, a groan.

Eyes still intent on the pin, the little man brought it down suddenly upon the opened pages of his book. He stabbed at random, driving the point home. Then he hurled the book to the floor, sat back, buried his face in his hands, and his shoulders shook with a silent sobbing.

A second sped. Stone blinked. And beyond the door, in the loft, the little man straightened up, reached for a long sheet of paper that might have been a polling-list, and scanned its surface. The

pin poised itself over the center of the sheet. Again the sigh, the stab, the sob.

Now the little man rose, and for a frantic moment, Stone wondered if he'd been detected. But no, the pin-wielder merely wandered down the row of books and pulled out another thick volume. He carried it back to the table and sat down, picking up the pin with his right hand as his left turned page after page. He scanned, scrutinized, then sighed, stabbed, sobbed.

Barton Stone descended from the top of the crate, replaced it carefully in the corner, and tiptoed down the stairs. He moved carefully and silently, and it was an effort to do so, because he wanted all the while to run.

His feeling was irrational, and he knew it, but he could not control himself. He had always experienced that sudden surge of fear in the presence of the demented. When he saw a drunk in a bar, he was afraid — because you never know what a drunk will do next, what will enter his mind and how he will act. He shied away from arguments, because of what happens to a man's reaction-pattern when he sees red. He avoided the mumblers, the people who talk to themselves or to the empty air as they shuffle down the street.

Right now he was afraid of a little fat man, a little fat man with a long, sharp, silver needle.

The needle was crooked at one end, Stone remembered — and he could see that needle sinking into his own throat, right up to the crooked angle. The fat man was crazy and Stone wanted no part of him. He'd go back to the rental agency, see Mr. Freed, tell him. Freed could evict him, get him out of there in a hurry. That would be the sensible way.

Before he knew it, Stone was back in his own walkup flat, resting on the bed and staring at the wall. Although it wasn't the wall he was seeing. He was seeing the little fat man and studying him as he sat at his big table. He was seeing the books and the sheafs and the long rolls and scrolls of paper.

He could group them in the background, so. Just sketch them in lightly, in order to place the figure. The khaki shirt hung thusly — and the open collar draped in this fashion. Now the outlines of the head and shoulders; be sure to catch the shrewd intensity, the concentrated concentration of the pose.

Stone had his sketch-pad out now, and his hands moved furiously. The sunlight would serve as a highlight over the shoulder. It would strike the silver pin and the reflection would fleck the features of the face.

The features — the face — most important. He began to rough it

in. If he could only capture the instant before the sob, if he could only fathom the secret of the eyes as the pin stabbed down, he'd have a painting.

What *was* that look? Stone had unconsciously catalogued and categorized the features. The proportions of nose to forehead, ears to head, chin to jaw; the relationship of brow and cheekbone to the eyes; he knew them and reproduced them. But the expression itself—particularly that look around the eyes—that was the key to it all.

And he couldn't get it down. He drew, erased, drew again. He made a marginal sketch and rubbed it out. The charcoal smeared his palm.

No, it was wrong, all wrong. He'd have to see him again. He was afraid to go, but he wanted that painting. He wanted to do it, he *had* to do it. There was a mystery here, and if he could only pin it down on canvas, he'd be satisfied.

*Pin* it down. The pin was what frightened him, he knew it now. It wasn't the man, so much. Granted, he was probably insane—with without the pin he'd be harmless, deprived of weapons.

Stone stood up. He went out, down the stairs, walked. He should have gone to the rental agency first, he told himself, but the other need was greater. He wanted to see his subject once more. He

wanted to stare into the face of the little fat man and read the secret behind it.

And he did. He climbed the stairs silently, mounted the crate quietly, directed his soundless gaze over the transom.

The fat man was still at work. New books, new papers bulked high on the big table. But the left hand turned the pages, the right hand poised the pin. And the endless, enigmatic pantomime played on. Sigh, stab, sob. Stop and shudder, shuffle through fresh pages, scan and scrutinize again, and then—sigh, stab, sob.

The silver pin glared and glistened. It glowed and glittered and grew. Barton Stone tried to study the face of the fat man, tried to impress the image of his eyes.

Instead, he saw the pin. The pin and only the pin. The pin that poised, the pin that pointed, the pin that pricked the page.

He forced himself to concentrate on the little man's face, forced himself to focus on form and features. He saw sorrow, read resignation, recognized revulsion, found fear there. But there was neither sorrow nor resignation, revulsion or fear in the hand that drove the pin down again and again. There was only a mechanical gesture, without pattern or meaning that Barton Stone could decipher. It was the action of a lunatic, the antic gesture of aberration.

Stone stepped down from the crate, replaced it in the corner, then paused before the loft door. For a moment he hesitated. It would be so simple merely to walk into the loft, confront the little man, ask him his business. The little man would look up, and Stone could stare into his eyes, single out and scrutinize the secrets there.

But the little man had his pin, and Stone was afraid. He was afraid of the pin that didn't sob or sigh, but merely stabbed down. And made its point.

The point — what was it?

Well, there was another way of finding out; the sensible way. Stone sidled softly down the stairs, padded purposefully up the street.

Here it was, *Acme Rentals*. But the door was locked. Barton Stone glanced at his watch. Only four o'clock. Funny he'd be gone so early, unless he'd left with a client to show some property or office-space.

Stone sighed. Tomorrow, then. Time enough. He turned and strode back down the street. He intended to go to his flat and rest before supper, but as he rounded the corner he saw something that stopped him in his tracks.

It was only a brownish blur, moving very fast. His eye caught a glimpse of khaki, a suggestion of a bowed back, a white-thatched

head disappearing into the doorway of a local restaurant. That was enough; he was sure, now. His little fat man had taken time out to eat.

And that meant —

Stone ran the remaining blocks, clattered up the rickety stairs. He burst into the loft, raced over to the table. Then, and then only, he stopped. What was he doing here? What did he hope to find out? What was he looking for?

That was it. He was looking for something. Some clue, some intimation of the little fat man's perverted purpose.

The books and papers billowed balefully all about him. There were at least half-a-hundred presently on the table. Stone picked up the first one. It was a telephone directory, current edition, for Bangor, Maine. Beneath it was another—Yuma, Arizona. And below that, in a gaudy cover, the city directory of Montevideo. At one side a long list of names, sheet after sheet of them, in French. The Town Roll of Dijon. And over at one side, the electoral rolls of Manila, P. I. Another city directory—Stone guessed it must be in Russian. And here was the phone-book from Leeds, and the census sheets from Calgary, and a little photostat of the unofficial census of Mombasa.

Stone paged through them, then directed his attention to another stack on the right-hand side of the

table. Here were opened books aplenty, piled one upon the other in a baffling miscellany. Stone glanced at the bottom of the collection. Another phone-book, from Seattle. City directory of Belfast. Voting list from Bloomington, Illinois. Precinct polling list, Melbourne, Australia. Page after page of Chinese ideographs. Military personnel, USAAF, Tokyo base. A book in Swedish or Norwegian — Stone wasn't sure which, but he recognized that it contained nothing but names; and like all the others it was recent, or currently published and in use.

And here, right on top, was a Manhattan directory. It was open, like the others, and apparently the choice of page had been made upon random impulse. Barton Stone glanced at the heading. FRE. Was there a pin-mark? He stared, found it.

*Freed, George A.* And the address.

Wait a minute! Wasn't that his rental agency man? Something began to form and fashion, and then Stone pushed the book away and ran out of the room and down the stairs and he rounded the corner and found the newsstand and bought his paper and clawed it open to the death-notices and then he read the name again.

*Freed, George A.* And the address. And on another page — Stone's

hands were trembling and it took him a while to find it — was the story. It had happened this morning. Accident. Hit by a truck crossing the street. Survived by, blah, blah, blah.

Yes, blah, blah, blah, and this morning (perhaps while Stone had been watching him the first time) the pin had pointed and stabbed and a name in the directory was marked for destruction. For death.

For *Death!*

*Nobody'd ever bother looking up there. You could hide out there for years without being caught.* Yes, you could gather together all the lists, all the sources, all the names in the world and put them into that deserted loft. You could sit there, day after day and night after night, and stick pins into them the way the legends said witches stuck pins into effigies of their victims. You'd sit there and choose book after book at random, and the pin would point. And wherever it struck, somebody died. You could do that, and you *would* do that. If you were the little fat man. The little fat man whose name was *Death*.

Stone almost laughed, although the sound didn't come out that way. He'd wondered why he couldn't get the little man's eyes right, wondered why he couldn't search out their secret. Now he knew. He'd encountered the final mystery — that of *Death* itself. *Death, himself.*

And where was Death now? Sitting in a cheap restaurant, a local hash-house, taking a breather. Death was dining out. Simple enough, wasn't it? All Stone need do now was find a policeman and take him into the joint.

"See that little fat guy over there? I want you to arrest him for murder. He's Death, you know. And I can prove it. I'll show you the pinpoint."

Simple. *Insanely* simple.

Maybe he was wrong. He *had* to be wrong. Stone rifled back to the death-notices again. Kooley, Leventhaler, Mautz. He had to make sure.

*Kooley, Leventhaler, Mautz.*

*Question:* how long does it take for Death to dine?

*Question:* does Death care to linger over a second cup of coffee?

*Question:* does one dare go back and search that directory to find the pinpoints opposite the names *Kooley, Leventhaler* and *Mautz*?

The first two questions couldn't be answered. They constituted a calculated risk. The third question could be solved only by action.

Barton Stone acted. His legs didn't want to move, his feet rebelled every step of the way, and his hands shook as he climbed the stairs once more.

Stone almost fell as he peered over the transom. The loft was still empty. And it was shrouded,

now, in twilight. The dusk filtering through the skylight provided just enough illumination for him to read the directory. To find the names of Kooley, Leventhaler and Mautz. And the pinpoints penetrating each, puncturing the *o*, the *v*, the *u*. Puncturing their names, puncturing their lives, providing punctuation. The final punctuation — period.

How many others had died today, in how many cities, towns, hamlets, crossroads, culverts, prisons, hospitals, huts, *kraals*, trenches, tents, igloos? How many times had the silver pin descended, forced by fatal fancy?

Yes, and how many times would it descend tonight? And tomorrow, and the next day, and forever and ever time without end, amen?

They always pictured Death wielding a scythe, didn't they? And to think that it was really just a pin — a pin with a curve or a hook in it. A long, sharp silver pin, like *that one there*.

The last rays of the dying sunset found it, set its length ablaze in a rainbow glow. Stone gasped, sharply. It was here, right here on the table, where the little fat man had left it when he went out to eat — the silver pin!

Stone eyed the sparkling instrument, noted the hooked end, and gasped again. It *was* a scythe, after all! A little miniature scythe of silver. The weapon of Death which cut down all mankind. Cut

down mankind without rhyme or reason, stabbed senselessly to deprive men forever of sensation. Stone could picture it moving in frantic rhythm over the names of military personnel, pick, pick, picking away at lives; point, point, pointing at people; stick, stick, sticking into human hearts. The fatal instrument, the lethal weapon, smaller than any sword and bigger than any bomb.

It was *here*, on the table.

He had only to reach out and take it —

For a moment the sun stood still and his heart stopped beating and there was nothing but Silence in the whole wide world.

Stone picked up the pin.

He put it in his shirt-pocket and stumbled out of the room, stumbled through darkness and tumbled down the flights of the night.

Then he was out on the street again, and safe. He was safe, and the pin was safe in his pocket, and the world was safe forever.

Or was it? He couldn't be sure.

He couldn't be sure, and he couldn't be sure, and he sat there in his room all night long, wondering if he'd gone completely mad.

For the pin was only a pin. True, it was shaped like a miniature scythe. True, it was cold and did not warm to the touch, and its point was sharper than any tool could ever grind.

But he couldn't be sure. Even

the next morning, there was nothing to show. He wondered if Death read the papers. He couldn't read *all* the papers. He couldn't attend *all* the funerals. He was too busy. Or, rather, he *had* been too busy. Now he could only wait, as Stone was waiting.

The afternoon editions would begin to provide proof. The home editions. Stone waited, because he couldn't be sure. And then he went down to the corner and bought four papers and he knew.

There were death-notices, still; of course there would be. Death-notices from yesterday. *Only* from yesterday.

And the front-pages carried further confirmation. The subject-matter of the stories was serious enough, but the treatment was still humorous, quizzical, or at best, speculative and aloof. Lots of smart boys on the wire-services and the city desks; too hardboiled to be taken in or commit themselves until they were certain. So there was no editorial comment, yet; just story after story, each with its own "slant".

The prisoner up at Sing-Sing who went to the chair last night — and was still alive. They'd given him plenty of juice, and the power worked, all right. The man had fried in the hot seat. Fried, literally, but lived. Authorities were investigating —

Freak accident up in Buffalo —

cables snapped and a two-ton safe landed squarely on the head and shoulders of Frank Nelson, 42. Broken back, neck, arms, legs, pelvis; skull completely crushed. But in Emergency Hospital, Frank Nelson was still breathing and doctors could not account for —

Plane crash in Chile. Eighteen passengers, all severely injured and many badly burned when engines caught fire, but no fatalities were reported and further reports —

City hospitals could not explain the sudden cessation of deaths throughout Greater New York and environs —

Gas main explosions, automobile accidents, fires and natural disasters; each item isolated and treated as a freak, a separate phenomenon.

That's the way it would be until, perhaps, tomorrow, when the hardboiled editors and the hardheaded medical men and the hardshelled Baptists and the hard-nosed military leaders and the hardpressed scientists all woke up, pooled their information, and realized that Death had died.

Meanwhile, the torn and the twisted, the burned and the maimed, the tortured and the broken ones writhed in their beds — but breathed and lived, in a fashion.

Stone breathed and lived, in a fashion, too. He was beginning to see the seared body of the convict,

the mangled torso of the mover, the agonized forms that prayed for the mercy of oblivion all over the world.

*Conscience doth make cowards of us all and no man is an island.* But on the other hand, Stone breathed and lived, after a fashion. And as long as he had the pin, he'd breathe and live forever. Forever!

So would they all. And more would be born, and the earth would teem with their multitude — what then? Very well, let the editors and the doctors and the preachers and the soldiers and the scientists figure out solutions. Stone had done his part. He'd destroyed Death. Or at the least, disarmed him.

Barton Stone wondered what Death was doing right now. Death, in the afternoon. Was he sitting in the loft, pondering over his piles of useless papers, lingering over his lethal ledgers? Or was he out, looking for another job? Couldn't very well expect to get unemployment compensation, and he had no social security.

That was *his* problem. Stone didn't care. He had other worries.

The tingling, for example. It had started late that morning, around noon. At first Stone ascribed it to the fact that he hadn't eaten or slept for over twenty-four hours. It was fatigue. But fatigue gnaws. Fatigue does not bite. It

doesn't sink its sharp little tooth into your chest.

*Sharp, Chest.* Stone reached up, grabbed the silver pin from his pocket. The little scythe was cold. Its sharp, icy point had cut through his shirt, pricked against his heart.

Stone laid the pin down very carefully on the table, and he even turned the point away from himself. Then he sat back and sighed as the pain went away.

But it came back again, stronger. And Stone looked down and saw that the pin pointed at him again. He hadn't moved it. He hadn't touched it. He hadn't even looked at it. But it swung around like the needle of a compass. And he was its magnetic pole. He was due North. North, cold and icy like the pains that shot through his chest.

Death's weapon had power — the power to stab him, stab his chest and heart. It couldn't kill him, for there was no longer any dying in the world. It would just stab him now, forever and ever, night and day for all eternity. He was a magnet, attracting pain. Unendurable, endless pain.

The realization transfixed him, just as the point of the pin itself transfixed him.

Had his own hand reached out and picked up the pin, driven it into its chest? Or had the pin itself risen from the table and sought its magnetic target? Did the pin have

its own powers? He wondered.

Yes. That was the answer, and he knew it now. Knew that the little fat man was just a man and nothing more. A poor devil who had to go out and eat, who slept and dozed as best he could while he still stabbed ceaselessly away. He was only a tool. *The pin itself was Death.*

Had the little man once looked over a transom or peered through a window in New York or Bagdad or Durban or Rangoon? Had he stolen the silver pin from yet another poor devil and then been driven by it; driven out into the street by the pin that pricked and pricked at his heart? Had he returned to the place where all the names in the world awaited their final sentencing?

Barton Stone didn't know. All he knew was that the pin was colder than arctic ice and hotter than volcanic fire, and it was tearing at his chest. Every time he tore it free, the point inexorably returned and his hand descended with it, forcing the pin into his chest. Sigh, stab, sob — the power of Death was in the pin.

And the power of Death animated Barton Stone as he ran through the nighted streets, panted up the midnight stairs, staggered into the loft.

A dim light burned over the table, casting its glow over the waiting shadows. The little fat man sat there, surrounded by his

books, and when he saw Barton Stone he looked up and nodded.

His stare was impersonal and blank. Stone's stare was agonized and intent. There was something Stone had to find out, once and for all; a question which must be answered. He recognized its nature and the need, sought and found his solution in the little fat man's face.

The little fat man *was* a man, and nothing more. He *was* merely the instrument, and the pin held all the power. That was enough for Barton Stone to know. It was all he could know, for the rest was only endless pain. He had to be relieved of the pain, had to be released from it, just as the poor

devils all over the world had to be relieved and released. It was logic, cold logic; cold as the pin, cold as Death.

Stone gasped, and the little fat man stood up and moved around from behind the table.

"I've been waiting for you," he said. "I knew you'd come back."

Stone forced the words out. "I stole the pin," he panted. "I've come to give it back — back where I got it."

The little fat man looked at him, and for the first time, Stone could read his eyes. In them he saw infinite compassion, limitless understanding, and an endless relief.

"What is taken cannot be returned," murmured the little man.



"Answer the table, will you, Marge?"

"I think you know that. When you took the pin, you took it forever. Or until—"

The little man shrugged and indicated the seat behind the table.

Silently, Stone sat down. The books bulked before him; the books, the directories, the papers and scrolls and lists that contained all the names in the world.

"The most urgent are on top," whispered the little man. "I sorted them while I waited."

"Then you knew I'd be back?"  
The little fat man nodded. "I came back, once, too. And I found — as you will find — that the pain goes away. You can remove the pin now, and get to work. There's so much work to do."

He was right. There was no longer any stabbing sensation in Stone's chest. The little scythe-shaped pin came away quite easily and balanced in Stone's right hand. His left hand reached for the topmost book. A small piece of paper, bearing a single scribbled name, rested on the opened volume.

"If you don't mind," breathed the little fat man. "This name first, please."

Stone looked at the little fat man. He didn't look down at the scribbled name — he didn't have to, for he knew. And his right hand stabbed down, and the little man sighed and then he fell over and there was only a wisp of dust.

Old dust, gossamer-light dust, soon blows away. And there was no time to look at the dancing, dissipating motes. For Barton Stone was sighing, stabbing, shuddering, sobbing.

And the pin pointed and pricked. Pricked the convict up in Sing-Sing and Frank Nelson in Buffalo Emergency, and the crash victims in Chile. Pricked Chundra Lal of Bombay, Ramona Neilson of Minneapolis, Barney Yates in Glasgow, Igor Vorpatchzki in Minsk, Mrs. Minnie Haines and Doctor Fisher and Urbonga and Li Chan and a man named John Smith in Upper Sandusky.

It was day and it was night and it was summer and it was autumn and it was winter and it was spring and it was summer again but you could hide out there for years without being caught.

All you did was keep shuffling the books, picking at random. That was the best you could do, the only fair way. Sometimes you got mad and took a lot from one place; sometimes you just kept going, plodding along and leaving it up to the pin.

You sighed, you stabbed, you shuddered and you sobbed. But you never stopped. Because the pin never stopped, the scythe was always swinging.

Thus it was, and thus it would be, forever. Until the day came, inevitably, when somehow, somewhere, someone would find out . . .

# E D D I E F O R S H O R T

B Y   W A L L A C E   W E S T

*You've no doubt heard the old one: The last man on earth sat in his room and there was a knock on the door. Well, this one reads: The last woman on earth stood before a microphone singing a love song to a man who did not exist. Then how was the human race to be perpetuated? A tough problem, truly, but the gal we call Dame Nature is used to tough ones.*

*"Cause I ain't got nobody,  
And nobody cares for me."*

LITA closed her eyes as she ended the old song. After a long moment she opened them to their dewy widest; smiled as though she knew a heartwarming secret; slid like a panther kitten from the top of the concert grand. Standing tall as a reed, she searched the floor with bare toes for her shoes.

That little-girl gesture always wowed the cash customers. They loved it, too, when she eased herself to the piano top as her turn began, displaying suntanned shoulders and a startling length of leg. They often cried into their Martinis as she cradled the microphone like a rag doll, kicked off her pumps because "I can't breathe right with shoes on, folks"



and sang torch songs of the '20's in that unbelievable contralto.

But tonight the cash customers were absent from the *Copa*. Only an automatic, fixed-focus TV camera stared at her with detached lechery as a phonograph finished the accompaniment.

"Goodnight, kind friends, wherever you may be," the girl signed off in a beckoning whisper. "See you tomorrow . . . huhm?"

Just before the *Off-The-Air* tell-tale winked she turned and swayed out of the "spot" in calm defiance of the rule that no feminine performer ever turns her back to an audience. (Lita's flat, uncorseted hips could retreat without shame, Bill said.)

Bill!

She crumpled against the silk-brocaded wall of the night club; clung there a second in the semi-darkness. Then she snatched the studio phone; jiggled the hook madly. Please God Bill still could answer!

"Lita!" Her radio engineer husband's voice was as slurred as though he had been drinking heavily. "Caught your act after all. 'Swunn'erful as usual, honey. You're bes' li'l trouper in th' world . . . in whole wide world."

"Don't let go!" She kept her own voice steady with tremendous effort. "I'm coming right over."

"Stay 'way from here!" Bill gritted. "We've been over all that before. Can't do thing for me.

Nobody can. Ol' Demon Carbon 14 caught up with me at last, even if my grandaddy *was* a hoss."

"But there must be something!"

"Nothing. I'm nine-tenths dead right now. I'm not in pain . . . jus' messy. I don't want you see me this way or try move my body. I like it 'ere in Master Control, with th' lights winkin' an' shinin' down on me." For a moment the words came clear and sharp: "If you risk contamination by coming here, I'll haunt you, Lita, so help me. And I'll bring along a whole army of little red demons. Don't you know who you are, Mrs. William Howard Day?"

"I only know I love you."

"I love you too. But don't forget that, so far as we know, you're the last woman left alive on earth."

"What does that matter if you . . . ?"

"Matters helluva lot." His voice blurred again. "Maybe human race *has* tried its damnedest commit suicide. Can't let it do stupid thing like that, can we? Can't jus' quit an' let th' croc's take over can we . . . so long as there's single chance?"

"No?"

"Course not. Know million good reasons why not. But time's runnin' out." She had to press the receiver tightly to her ear to hear him now. "Here's what I done. Leavin' th' WGBS carrier

wave on permanent'. It'll run until Miami's atomic power plant breaks down . . . maybe year or so. Hookin' in th' shortwave an' TV transmitters. Th' network's down but anyone, most anywhere, can spot a 50,000 watt carrier an' follow it . . . follow it . . . Wait a minute, honey. Gotta take some medicine . . . if I can fin' my damn mouth. Don't go 'way."

"I'll never go 'way, Bill," she sobbed. "I'll be right here always."

"Atta girl." He spoke clearly again for a moment. "Well, I figure carrier's not enough. World's in a mess. Gotta give more incentive have somebody find you. So you must keep singin', see? Rigged up a time clock thing. It'll switch in the *Copa*' ever' night at nine, jus' like always. An' ever' night you climb up on the roost an' sing, jus' like always."

"No! No, Bill!" This time she did scream. "Bill, I couldn't."

"Could too. Gotta! If there's a single man alive anywhere who's near a workin' radio, he'll hear you sooner, later. He'll come to that voice. Even if he has to walk through boilin' pitch. He'll come, jus' like I came alla way from . . . where I come from, honey?"

"From China," she husked. "Oh Bill. For God's sake . . ."

"Yeah. I keep forgettin' now. God's sake . . . 'Manity's sake, too. An' I don't care whether he's

yellow, or black, or pea-green and has bat ears an' cross eyes. If he comes you, uh, marry him. See? Show mus' go on. All that."

"No!" The girl sank to her knees on the parqueted floor.

"Yes!" The voice was so weak now it seemed coming already from the other side of the grave. "Promise. Quick! 'Scomin' up signoff time for . . . for . . ."

"I promise, sweetheart." She knelt, slim and proud again, as though in the light from some unearthly "spot." "I promise."

"Knew you would . . . hon." The receiver rattled and choked.

A green-eyed, long-legged, empty-hearted girl walked the streets of "America's Playground."

The streets were empty, too. When the radioactive gas cloud swept across the nation it had sterilized the city of all but insect life.

Where were the piled corpses, the wrecked cars, the evidence of last-minute frenzied looting that prophets of doom always had warned of? Miami's City Fathers had been clever about that. Fearing that an epidemic would follow wide-scale radiation deaths, they spread the word early that Hell Bomb gas tended to concentrate in the canyons of city streets. There might be a chance to escape, or recover, they said, if one went out into the country.

So the wretched Mjamians, as they sickened and watched the pale blood start oozing through their sun-varnished skins, fled to the Keys, to the 'Glades, even to the despised and frigid North. They fled in their shiny Cadillacs and Jaguars, their picture-windowed house trailers or their beaten-up Jeeps; via their aerial Route of the Stars and their Seaboard Airline Railway. Even as they fled, they died.

"And civilization fell upon the young men," Lita paraphrased the Book of Job, "and they are dead: And I only am escaped to tell you."

A pity, she thought as she walked the shining, antiseptic streets, that the Fathers had not lived to appreciate the success of their greatest publicity stunt.

Sometimes, when the sun was high, she delighted her woman's heart by wandering through cool shops where the wealth of nations lay heaped and forgotten. Or, in a book store, she brushed aside stacks of murder mysteries and "light summer reading" in vain search of some volume containing a key to the catastrophe.

It had been such a neat little war, over in a far corner of Asia. New weapons had been tested and perfected there. Beardless boys had been hardened into reckless killers, and surplus products disposed of without the necessity for cutting prices. The neat little war

had gone on for almost a generation. Everyone except the boys and their parents had come to take it for granted. Something to be deplored, like sin, but nothing to fret about, really.

Then, one still winter night, someone, somewhere, had tossed an atom bomb over the Pole at an European capital. (The bomb fragments, they said, bore Latin characters.) And someone else, somewhere, had tossed an atom bomb over the Pole at an American industrial center . . . Detroit, wasn't it? (Those fragments, the experts said, bore Cyrillic characters.)

The next day . . . Christmas Day, 1964 . . . the Hell Bombs fell. Thirteen spaced evenly along the Pacific Coasts of North and South America and, by coincidence, thirteen more along the Atlantic Coast of Europe and Africa.

The West Wind did the rest.

Lita, who read poetry over the air now and then, remembered how men had scattered before that wild west wind, "like ghosts from an enchanter fleeing."

Ghosts! She would hurry her steps when that thought came, never looking behind her.

Sometimes, instead of walking, she would take her car . . . a Cambridge blue MG . . . and drive to a beach. It was less lonely near the water. There was life there. Would the sharks, or the

croc's, as Bill had suggested, some day climb out of that water as men had once done? She shuddered. Nevertheless she missed Bill less while she was swimming.

She swam well, as all singers do, thanks to her splendid chest development. At first she wore a suit, true to her prim upbringing in the orphanage. One day she forgot to put it on. And after that she didn't bother much with clothes in the daytime and became golden brown all over in the warm spring sunshine.

At night things were different, of course. She dressed in the loveliest evening gowns she could find in the shops — a new one each day. She put a hibiscus flower behind her left ear. She made up with the same care she had used when the club was packed to the doors and waiters were jamming little tables between the knees of the ringsiders. And she sang to all those who would never hear her again.

"Bill," from Show Boat, was her theme song. It had been ever since that night when the real Bill, still in uniform, had committed the unpardonable sin of threading his way among the ringside tables, lifting her from the piano after she had finished that number, and kissing her soundly while the customers cheered.

How long ago had that been?

Why, only a month! They had been married a week later, as soon as Bill was sure he could return to his old job at WGBS. Another week of bliss, apartment hunting, buying a few sticks of furniture, getting settled, lovemaking . . . And then the Hell Bombs fell.

Sunk in a dream that added poignancy to her singing, Lita cradled the mike and wandered, as the spirit moved her, through the favorites nobody ever got enough of: "I'm Falling in Love with Someone," "Smoke Gets in Your Eyes," "Can't Help Lovin' Dat Man" and, for a change in pace, "Summertime."

*"One of these mornin's you goin'  
to rise up singin';  
Then you'll spread yo' wings an'  
you'll take the sky.  
But till that mornin' there's a  
nothin' can harm you  
With Daddy an' Mammy standin'  
by."*

Why, she wondered, had so few songs like that been written in recent years? Perhaps Daddy an' Mammy had turned their backs on children who never stopped squabbling among themselves. Certainly there had been no singin' as all humanity took to the sky that mornin' when the gas came.

Stop it, she told herself. Don't get cynical. So the orphanage had been a poor substitute for her physicist father who had died a year-long death after an early

atomic test bomb had exploded prematurely out on the New Mexican desert. It had been a poor, prim substitute, too, for the mother she had never known. But the Sisters *had* let her sing at that recital where the manager of the *Copa'* had heard her. That had led to Bill. And maybe, as he thought, some mutation in her father's irradiated germ plasm had made her, and perhaps her children, immune to the after-effects of alpha, beta and gamma rays.

Her children!

For long moments she sat silent on the piano top, staring into the glazed eye of the TV pickup. Well, if Bill hoped there was a chance that a few others had survived . . . She owed him that, dear soul, up there across the street with the lights of Master Control winkin' and shinin' down on him as he lay across the console as though asleep.

She jerked her mind away. Three times in as many days since his death she had found herself standing with her hand on the knob of the WGBS Master Control Room door. And three times the winking ON THE AIR! KEEP OUT! sign had stopped her.

Inside that door lay madness. And there was no time for madness.

She shook herself savagely. As the Standby light beside the

*Copa'* microphone flickered another kind of warning she swept, heartbroken and magnificent, into her last number:

*"Some enchanted evening*

*You may see a stranger . . ."*

On and on she drove herself, white-faced, to the climax:

*"Once you have found him,*

*Never . . . let . . . him . . . go."*

In a state of near-collapse she slid to the floor, searched for her shoes, and bade the ghosts farewell. She fled from the dim club out into the bright street.

What would happen, she wondered as she pulled herself together, on that final night when the power plant failed as it was bound to do eventually. . . ? When the streets would be darkened forever? She clenched her teeth and ran all the way home . . . home to the apartment she and Bill had chosen because it was so cheerful and so close to the club and the station.

But the street lights, as well as the Nemo signal on the orchestra stand, remained faithful. At dusk, electric eyes turned on the tall standards bordering the boulevards and Biscayne Bay. They switched on the proud Cadillac signs and the glow in grimy store windows. And at dawn they extinguished them all in thrifty fashion.

Bulbs were beginning to burn out. A short circuit had started a

fire that gutted several blocks in the northern part of town. But, on the whole, Miami still turned its impersonal, white-toothed smile of welcome to an empty sea. Palm fronds blew, whispering, about the streets sometimes. That was offset by accumulating dust that made Lita's footsteps almost inaudible.

Then, one night as she was walking just a little faster than necessary through a dark spot, she heard the echo.

Startled out of a reverie, she stopped short. There was no sound except her rapid breath. Laughing a little, she went on. Was she really expecting that man with the bat ears and cross eyes to accost her?

The echo had returned!

In just a moment now she would turn and look to see where it was coming from. Ten more steps . . . Fifteen . . . Fifty . . . But that street light had burned out, too, since last night.

Maybe it was a shark, or a croc', coming out of the sea or the swamp to survey its new kingdom? So soon?

For heaven's sake, Lita. Turn and look right now. You're acting like a child. You're acting . . . The poem came unbidden:

*"Like one that on a lonesome road  
Doth walk in fear and dread,  
And having once turned round,  
walks on,"*

*And turns no more his head;  
Because he knows a frightful fiend  
Doth close behind him tread."*

Lita kicked off her pumps and fled, like a benighted Diana, through the dust. The echo footsteps speeded, too, but could not match her. Only when the girl had reached the entrance to her apartment building, a vantage point that somehow gave her a feeling of security, did she dare look back.

Far down the street a black shadow pursued her. She gripped the doorhandle; stood her ground panting, heart drumming against her ribs. Whatever it was that came, she must see it clearly or live in terror forevermore.

A huge dog? No! It ran on its hind legs.

Then it crouched low for a moment and her misgivings returned.

It rose to its feet again. Even in the spotty lighting she could see, now, that it was human. A man? Coming in answer to her songs? Bill had been right! Would he be yellow or green as a vegetable?" She tried to smile but only made a face.

No! Not green! Her hands were pressing against her smooth throat now to stifle a scream.

Black! Black as a broken street light!

And old . . . incredibly, crookedly old.

And not even a man! She let out her held breath in a great sigh.

Another woman! Thank God!

"Doan need be afear'd o' me, honey," a cracked voice called from somewhere among the rainbows that had started wheeling before her eyes. "See, I picked up yer shoes an' brung 'em along . . . Lawsy! Whatsa matter with you, chile?"

Lita recovered consciousness to find herself lying in her own bed upstairs. Beside her sat an old Negro woman. Her eyes, in an incredibly wrinkled face, were as sharp and excited as if she had just seen the glory of the Lord.

"Who are you? How did you get here? What do you want?" Lita sat up, to find that she had been undressed and put properly to bed.

"Name of Verna Smith," the crone grinned, snaggletoothed and benevolent. "Ah come from down Key West way. My man was a shrimp fisher, till . . ." She shuddered and held out her fists to something invisible, the thumbs thrust between the first and second fingers.

"One night Ah hears you singin' when Ah jus' happens to turn on one o' them battery radios in a store down theah. Ah recongnize you right off 'cause mah man ussta lissen to you a lot w'en he was blue. Firs', Ah figure dat Miami ain't been hit. An den Ah knows it has been or you wouldn't be a singin' so lonesome like. Ah figure you need somebody take care o'

you. An' here Ah am. Took more time'n Ah counted on, what with th' busses not runnin' an' ever'-thing."

"That was awfully nice of you . . . Mrs. Smith." Lita felt warm clear down to her toes, so warm that she broke the old Southern taboo against calling Negroes "Mrs."

"Jus' call me Verna, ma'am."

"And you call me Lita. I'm sorry I ran away from you. And fainting like that! I can't imagine what got into me."

"You can't ma' . . . Lita, honey?" The old woman's eyes became even brighter and her smile spread almost from ear to ear."

"No. I'm strong as an ox."

"You doan know you gonna have a baby, chile?"

"A baby!" For a moment Lita seemed about to faint again. "How do you know?"

"Ol' Verna ain't been a mid-wife all these years fo' nothin'."

"Oh no!" Lita began to laugh wildly. "Next week 'East Lynne'! But you're wrong, Verna. I'm not going to have a baby. I'm going to have twins — a boy and a girl — and we'll call them Adam and Eve."

Sunlit days flowed by. Hushed days when no bird sang. Days when only the chirping of crickets and the perfume of flowers testified that a part of the world still

lived. Nights punctuated by the brief, brave, useless night club interval. For Lita knew it was useless. If only one person had answered her call by this time it would not be answered again.

Yet she clung to the ritual, putting her heart and magnificent throat into the old repertoire . . . even adding new numbers. Somewhere Bill must be listening.

For weeks after Verna came and insisted on taking over the few household chores, Lita did little else but swim, or drive along the shore through haunts of the wealthy dead in Palm Beach, Fort Lauderdale and Miami Beach. There the marble pools already were encrusted with algae, the Afromobiles were idle, the Fountain of Youth dried up. Or she would sit in the spring sun and dream, like a brown female Buddha with a poodle cut.

But, as months passed and she felt life stirring within her, the girl became subtly worried. It wouldn't be enough to bring a brace of young savages into the world. (She knew she would bear twins. God couldn't be cruel enough to ordain otherwise!) The children would have to be educated to rebuild civilization, a better civilization. Yet their mother knew so little . . . so little. A smattering of high school; never completed.

She literally hurled herself at the City Library and, when its endless stacks confused and fright-

ened her, at the texts she found in The University of Miami. She began with the grandiose idea that she somehow must ground herself in science . . . in physics . . . and find the magic to ward off another atomic cloud.

The equations remained hen tracks. She left them; turned to economics, to sociology, to psychology. Lita was nobody's fool. Yet, without a teacher, she lost her way in endless bypaths to knowledge. So much learning! And she but one small woman!

History was better. But it justified everything — murder, war, famine, fascism and pestilence — all were for the best in the best possible of worlds. All, from the viewpoint of history, were inevitable, even as the Hell Bomb had become inevitable, once atomic fission and fusion had been left in the hands of the merchants of death.

One of the bypaths she followed led her, though, to the bright world of Greek drama and poetry. Here was music expressed in words . . . expressed in a way that she could comprehend. She dropped her other studies and, all through the hot summer months read the ancient authors — Homer, Xenophon, Aristophanes, Euripides, Sophocles. But especially Herodotus, with his prose songs of how it was the custom for brothers and sisters to marry in Egypt; of the curse that the wealth of Croesus

brought upon its owner; of how, during the Persian War, Themistocles made the craven Greeks into a nation of heroes by the simple, brutal process of beating their stupid heads together.

Often she read snatches aloud to Verna, at first not dreaming that the Negro would understand anything more than the rhythm of the words. The old woman amazed her by rocking back and forth, arms around her shrunken knees and grizzled head nodding in glee.

"Doan tell me, chile!" she would exclaim. "Doan tell me! 'Way back three thousand years, an' soon as folks get a little money in de bank dey start cuttin' up. Dat's firs' thing you gotta teach the twins. Money made to be spent, have good time with, not to save an' fight fo' with razors."

"You do think I'll have twins, Verna?"

"Lands sakes alive, chile. You still worritin' about dat? I gotta wanga . . . dat's Voodoo charm my man brung from Haiti once. Wanga says you gonna have twins."

"Do you believe in Voodoo?"

"Course Ah doan. Jus' th' same, Ah doan make no faces at Papa Legba when it's dahk!"

Came the time, in mild September, when Lita found she could not lift herself to the top of the *Copa'* piano with her old lithe grace. Came the time when she

would have much preferred to go to bed at nightfall than sing for all the ghosts in Christendom.

And yet she sang . . . lullabies mostly, now, to get in training . . . as she would continue to sing so long as the telltale light beckoned her to the mike. She was not superstitious. Yet she knew that disaster would strike, did she break her word to Bill. Voodoo? Well, so be it!

Came a day, late in September, that was humid and hot and still.

"Hurricane weather," muttered Verna, making a sign. "You better stay home tonight, honey. You is near your time an' they's a big bull blow headin' dis way, mark my word."

Evening crept in sullenly. Sharp gusts of wind whipped the palms and rattled the jalousies. Verna wrung her worn hands but Lita insisted on making her shapelessness as presentable as possible in a sequinned black evening dress made for a dowager.

"I have to go," she whimpered stubbornly, even as a shout of wind heralded the near approach of the storm. "We'll drive, though. We'll be home before it gets really bad."

She was wrong. Hardly had they reached the club when the storm leaped yowling at them like a great cat. It whisked the top off the MG with one paw and slammed the little car over the curb and against the side of a

building with the other. As they dragged themselves out of the wreck and under the protection of the club portico, rain descended like a theater curtain, so dense that the few remaining street lights seemed extinguished.

"You hurt, honey chile?" panted the black woman as she guided the other inside and fought to close the foyer door.

"No." Lita answered through clenched teeth. "I can go on." She gasped, bent forward in agony and snatched at a chair for support.

The hurricane was screaming like a banshee tangled in the tops of the skyscrapers. Palms splintered, crashed and skidded along the sidewalks. A sign toppled into the street and rolled, a monstrous cartwheel.

"Stay outside, you Papa Legba," Verna shouted back at the storm as she set her thin shoulder to the door. "Doan you go botherin' dis pore gal tonight. She got enough on her min'!"

The door inched into its frame and latched. The brocade hangings, which had been flapping like wings, folded along the walls.

"We're late," Lita gasped. "See. The light is on. Bill's waitin'!"

She stumbled toward the piano. Halfway across the floor she moaned and crumpled.

"Here. Ah help you." Verna lifted the stricken girl and half-led, half-carried her toward the

Ladies' Lounge. "Jus' doan you be skeered. Verna take care o' you."

"But I'm on the air," Lita whimpered. "Please . . . The show . . ."

At that moment the full force of the storm was unleashed. The glass in the foyer door smashed inward. Water poured after it, as though sprayed from a fire hose."

The house lights dimmed, flickered and went out. The Nemo tell-tale lingered, an accusing green eye. Then it, too, was gone. Lita screamed.

Verna dragged her the rest of the way to the Lounge.

The pain ebbed at last and flowed away. Lita roused to full consciousness, utterly spent. She caught the gleam of a flashlight out of the corner of her eye.

"Verna?" she called against the muted thunder of the storm.

"You feel better, honey chile?" The crone hovered over her.

"I . . . Yes, I guess so . . . How are the . . . twins?"

Verna stood silent, the flash trembling in her hands.

"There are twins?" Lita struggled to sit up but was pushed firmly back among the cushions of what must be a divan.

"No'm." Despite her efforts, the Negro's voice rose to a wail. "Not twins, honey."

Lita turned her face to the wall and let slow tears smear her

cheeks. Again she was a little girl in pigtails, back at the orphanage. She had been punished by being shut in a dark closet for some infraction of the mysterious, inflexible rules. Illogically, savagely, she blamed herself. God, or that impersonal Fate the ancient Greeks believed in, had turned a cold back upon her because she had broken the troupers' code that the show must go on.

"It's a girl," she said at last. Obviously the brat must be a woman child; one who would stare accusingly at her in her old age; one who would hate her for having been brought into a dead world.

"No'm," Verna soothed her. "It's a boy. Healthy as a cricket, too, honey. Must weigh all o' nine pound."

A boy! Lita's world turned over once more. The tears stopped flowing. She stared up at the dim ceiling in abject terror and listened to the wind which was shaking the building and the rain that lashed it with whips.

A boy? Under her wet eyelids she was witnessing the destruction of a great city which no one had battened down against the storm. Trees uprooted. Windows smashed and the baubles behind them soaked to trash. Sheet-iron and aluminum roofs ripped off in long strips, rolled into monstrous cylinders and tossed into the streets to charge up and down like juggernauts . . .

No. Not juggernauts. Like flapping Furies in pursuit of Oedipus. Scourging Oedipus because he had committed incest with his mother? Nonsense! Scourging the world for daring to commit suicide, leaving the altars of the gods empty of incense and sacrifices.

She began laughing hysterically . . . laughing like a Fury herself.

Verna, thinking to quiet her, brought the child kicking in its swaddling of torn brocade; held it under the flashlight beam for her to see.

"What you gonna call yo' son, Miz Lita?" she pleaded.

"Does he need a name, poor thing?" The girl fought her hysteria down.

"Sho' do," the old woman whispered as a dazzle of lightning outlined the lounge door. "Have baby in a hurricane, better name him quick or mebbe you doan have a chance."

Lita stared at the door as though waiting for the crackling flashes to illuminate her future. Perhaps, in spite of everything, someone, somewhere, was coming to her over the rim of the dead world.

And if not? Well, she was young . . . barely nineteen. There was still time . . . plenty of time to keep her promise to Bill . . . Furies or no Furies.

"We'll call him Eddie," she said. "Eddie for short."

# STAR CHILD

BY BILL PETERS

*Do you like a little truth with your fiction? Then read on, because Bill Peters attempts to show, herein, that homo sapiens, the inventor of the hydrogen bomb, really hasn't made much progress in two thousand years.*

THE FIRST recorded contact with thinking matter from outer space came at 7:03 P.M., EDT. No one on Earth was prepared for it, of course, and the first reactions were a blend of skeptical astonishment and excitement, plus a vague but almost pleasurable sense of terror.

Perhaps it isn't completely accurate to say that the people of earth were unprepared; after all, they had been inundated over the years by floods of predictions and theorizings concerning the nature of the great stellar systems, and of the creatures who probably inhabited those distant galaxies.

So, considering this, the people of earth had been conditioned to

the concept that other creatures might be living useful and/or interesting lives somewhere in the space that stretched endlessly away from their own tiny planet.

But their interest in these creatures was hardly acute. Rather it was like a boy's awareness of the existence of whole living cultures in the microscopic world; it was remarkable to speculate about, and so forth, but these fabulous little worlds had no significance except as natural curiosities. The microscopic world, and the world of outer space were alike in this respect as far as most of the people on earth were concerned. Apply the Jamesian test-question (If the opposite were true, what

difference would it make?) and one saw instantly that whether or not creatures existed in outer space made absolutely no difference at all.

Then came the contact!

It occurred suddenly and dramatically.

At 7:01 P.M., EDT, every television screen in the world went dark. Those which hadn't been turned on at the time underwent the same change; the normal gray color of the screen deepened to a shade that was nearly black. Also, all movie screens went dark. This occurred to home-projectors as well as those screens in commercial theatres.

All radios became silent.

All telegraph equipment ceased to operate.

The trans-Atlantic and trans-Pacific cables went dead.

For one confusing moment every medium of communication in the world was out of order.

Engineers and maintenance men moved quickly to restore proper operations, but were stumped from the outset by the fact that nothing seemed to be wrong: no fuses were blown, no lines were down, no generators had exploded. The quick tests indicated that all equipment was in normal operating shape — with the exception of course that it simply wasn't operating.

After about thirty seconds of this quite a lot of exasperated TV

viewers tried to phone their local stations, but found that their telephones were dead. Worried telegraphers tried to get in touch with supervisors, but that wasn't possible.

It was very odd. Had the situation lasted longer it is probable that panic would have set in; after all, this was the Twentieth Century, and the people weren't accustomed to having their infallible little marvels suddenly go out of whack.

But before anyone became too upset, a message came over the network of frozen communication apparatus. It was given by a voice that spoke calmly from dark TV and movie screens, and which clattered over long-distance wires, over the trans-oceanic cables, and over the great steel web of Western Union.

The message was repeated in the dozen or so major languages of Earth. Later (when normal communications were resumed) the capitols of the world compared what they had heard and, allowing for small distortions in translations, agreed that they had all heard the same message.

And this was the message:

The speaker, who gave no name, announced that he was speaking to earth from the star, Sirius. In a flat, unemotional voice he said that Sirius was due to explode within the next forty-eight

hours. The population of Sirius (a reasonable, intelligent bunch, the people of earth were to agree) would be destroyed. There was no escape. The catastrophe was too imminent. Despite their scientific progress, despite all their know-how and skill, they were helpless to save themselves. This, the speaker announced calmly, was a great pity. For the thinking life on Sirius had solved all of its problems millions of years ago; they had conquered disease, poverty and war. They had learned the secrets of happiness. Their communities existed in peace, plenty and contentment.

For some time (the speaker continued) the councils of Sirius had planned to transmit their knowledge to earth. Earth could use their techniques to great advantage — obviously. However, extinction was near; there was no time for them to complete their long-contemplated plans.

But while there was no hope for Sirius, there was still hope for earth. The scientists of Sirius, working grimly against a deadline of destruction, had completed a space ship which could transport one of them across the void to earth. But not an adult; the pressures of the trip precluded that. Therefore they were going to attempt a desperate expedient; one of their infants would be dispatched to earth. The child might survive the trip. And if it did, in

a few years time it would be the equal, mentally, of the most intelligent man in the world. When it applied its vastly higher reasoning powers to the problems of earth a new era for mankind would be born. The child, when it came to maturity, would tell earth how to live in peace, how to solve its problems, how to conquer its diseases.

Respect and nurture this child, the last flower of an older and better order. This was almost the conclusion of the speaker's remarks. He added this last sentence: do these things and you will be saved.

And that was the end of the message from the anonymous voice from Sirius.

Reactions to this phenomenon were mingled. A good number of people were glad to have their radios and TV sets working again, and settled down with another beer to watch the fights, or listen to some high-priced comedian. No one was sure that the whole thing hadn't been a hoax. The press associations put out dope stories on it right away. Orson Welles was contacted, and said he'd had nothing to do with it. Some commentators called it a Russian trick. Pravda called it a capitalist dodge to take people's mind off the chicanery of their masters. Einstein had no comment. The authorities on Ellis Island admitted they wouldn't

know how to classify a child from outer Space.

For twenty-four hours the episode got every conceivable kind of play, and then people pretty much forgot about it. After all, it was a bit like the world in the lens of a microscope — interesting but not really significant. People shrugged it off. A cab driver from Brooklyn, on a national TV show, summed up the general attitude when he said, "Look, don't bother me with kids from Siri — ri — well, whatever you call it. I got problems of my own. The Dodgers are three games out of first place, so who cares about Sirius?"

That was the attitude.

Then Sirius exploded.

That was a fact, ascertained by cameras mounted in high-power telescopes at observation points throughout the world.

This development caused a marked change in most people's reactions. Now they became uneasy. A great star had disappeared from the heavens, a familiar landmark of schoolboys and sauntering lovers had vanished for all time. The repercussions of its passing had started vast storms billions of miles out on the seas of space. And the people were fearful. They watched the stars suspiciously. Their concept of these heavenly bodies had come under drastic revision. A star was, by its nature, remote, con-

stant, unchanging. But Sirius had exploded, after one of its inhabitants had talked to the people of earth — and that behavior was the antithesis of remote, constant, and unchanging. Supposing all the planets and all the stars should get it into their heads to behave in this whimsical manner? Earth might then be tossed about like a chip in a storm, or destroyed like a clay pigeon in a shooting gallery.

It was a time of fear. Everyone of course remembered the content of the message from Sirius. A child from this ancient star was on its way to earth — if that anonymous voice had told the truth. And the implications in that were worrisome. Theoretically, it was difficult to become terrified by a baby, whether it was launched from Sirius, or in the more conventional manner. But people managed it, nevertheless. The child might be radioactive, it might be infested with germs that would destroy the population of earth, it might . . . it might be anything.

Three weeks passed, during which time the governments of the world discussed the ramifications of the situation. These sessions were marked by a spirit of friendly courtesy. If some superior being was coming to earth, then this was something to be cheerful about. Even the least astute observer could see that the

tensions existing between nations were growing more dangerous by the day. The question of who was in the right and who was in the wrong had become very muddled. But everyone knew that these conflicts had to be resolved immediately and peacefully. Otherwise the spark might flash and the powder keg on which the world sat would go up with a roar. And that was why the delegates to these first councils were optimistic and happy. The world needed help; that was obvious. And there was a possibility that help was on the way. That was fine.

Then astronomers picked up the path of a tiny object that was neither a star, a planet, a comet or an asteroid. Mathematicians checked its orbit quickly, and announced that it had passed through (or originated from) the area that had formerly been occupied by the star Sirius. And they further concluded that it would enter the atmosphere of earth in exactly sixty-four days, nine hours and thirteen minutes.

Where would it land? This was the question everyone asked.

The astronomers and mathematicians checked their figures carefully, re-checked them again, and announced that the object (which no one termed a space ship) would strike the earth (if it were not incinerated by passage through the atmosphere) in a mountain-

ous, unpopulated area of the state of Nevada.

The United Nations set up a committee to investigate and control whatever happened after the object had landed on earth. This was an obvious necessity. The committee was designated as the Sirius Authority, and was composed of a delegate from each member nation of the UN.

The Sirius Authority convened and immediately faced the problem of having nothing to do. While TV cameras hummed and flash bulbs blazed, various delegates stood and talked in generalities. "We must reserve judgment . . ." "Full Inquiries must be initiated . . ." "The interests of the world demand . . ." These were phrases that studded every speech.

The only excitement was furnished by a delegate from an Iron Curtain country. With a heavy-handed attempt at humor, he began by saying, "My government is not ready to accuse the United States of blowing-up Sirius. That, we agree, is one instance of destruction in which the United States has had no hand."

No one smiled at this, and he went on in a stronger voice, frowning now and wagging a forefinger at the assembly. "However, my government wishes me to express its concern over the fact that this inhabitant of Sirius is coming to land in the United States. We are

$$ds^2 = \frac{\sum}{M^2} g_{\mu\nu} dx^\mu dx^\nu$$

$$d\sigma^2 = C^2 dt^2$$

$$\frac{P_{XY}}{gPN} = \frac{A}{gk} \cdot \frac{2IVK^2A + (a + 2VK^2)}{(A - IC)}$$

not suspicious of the intentions of the United States, nor do we assume that it will take advantage of this coincidental development. However, we must watch all future actions in connection with this event with the greatest vigilance."

He sat down on this note. The delegates from Great Britain and the United States exchanged weary little smiles . . .

No one on earth, with the possible exception of some remote African tribesmen, slept for three days before the arrival of the ship from Sirius.

The army had cleared everybody out of the area in which it was expected to land. Those persons who had business there were screened and installed in barracks which had been erected along the police lines. This was a formidable group, consisting of newspapermen, scientists, demolition ex-

perts, doctors, mechanics, guided missile specialists, army, navy and marine observers, plus the full membership of the Sirius Authority. Feeding and barracking them became a minor problem in logistics.

The atmosphere was tense and vaguely apprehensive. Conversations were carried on in lowered voices, and few people were smiling. Everyone watched the skies.

However, the actual arrival of the ship was somewhat undramatic. It came into sight exactly nine minutes before the mathematicians had predicted it would land. It was large, cigar-shaped and gleamed in the sunlight. Three minutes after it was first seen, the forward section of the ship disappeared. There was no explosion or blast. The nose just melted away. This caused a stir of alarm. It was thought that the

$$\sum \Delta M_2$$



intense heat generated by the passage through the earth's atmosphere might reduce the ship to a cinder. But nothing of the sort happened. The tail-structure of the ship melted away also, and what was left — a gleaming cylinder about sixty-feet long — settled gently out of sight beyond a range of low hills.

Mechanized columns set out after it immediately. Geiger counters were in use, and several companies of tanks fanned out to converge in a pincer movement on the invisible ship. Planes roared overhead and reported by radio that the gleaming cylinder had come to rest on an easily accessible ledge.

The first elements reached it within half an hour. For a few moments they hesitated, staring at the ship which looked like a giant aluminum cigar. Their voices died away, and a soft heavy silence settled over the scene. Someone with a sense of history might have made an immortal statement then, but the general in charge was a man of action.

"Let's go, men," he said quietly.

The group approached the ship, and saw then that its hull was dotted with plaques on which were printed lists of precise directions. These directions related to a control panel in the nose of the ship. "Turn this rheostat so many degrees . . . move this lever to such-and-such a posi-

tion . . ." A child could have followed the orders.

But nothing was done precipitately. Scientists inspected the ship from all angles for an hour or so and then, having learned very little, recommended that the directions on the plaques be followed.

This was done promptly. And when the final instruction had been obeyed a section of the top of the ship slid back, revealing a glass panel. The general, using a ladder, clambered up and peered through the glass.

Then he yelled, "Hey, there's a kid in here!" in a voice that was, for no good reason, both surprised and indignant . . .

The next steps were blanketed in security measures. Newspapermen were herded away at rifle-point, and a team of doctors removed the child from the ship. (It had been packed in a jelly-like substance, which apparently had begun to dissolve when the cylinder was opened.) By ambulance the child was taken to a waiting plane, and then flown to an hospital in Manhattan. An entire floor had been set aside for the child, and the dozens of important people who had been appointed to assay the significance of its arrival and existence on earth.

Press, radio and TV was barred from this floor, while a number of brilliant medical specialists ex-

amined the visitor from space.

The world's eyes and ears and hearts strained toward that vast building in Manhattan. Crowds surged along the streets that bordered it, laughing, shouting, speculating. Their mood was nearly riotous, and mounted police were on hand to prevent them from assaulting the entrance to the hospital.

Two hours later a bulletin was issued.

The child was male, and seemed to have suffered no ill effects from its long journey.

That was all, but it was enough!

A cheer roared up from the crowds around the hospital, a cheer that was echoed throughout the world.

Everyone felt wonderful. The news was exciting; it broke the humdrum routine of living; and, in some curious way, it brought hope to the hearts of men.

Dr. Mark MacNeill could hardly believe it when his chief, Dr. Masterson, told him that he had been appointed as one of the physicians to the child from Sirius. It was the kind of luck you didn't even bother dreaming about. Too good, too miraculous, you thought, and pushed even the ghost of it from your head. But it had happened — amazingly, it had happened.

The two men were in Dr. Mas-

terson's office at the time, which was three days after the arrival of the baby from space.

"Don't thank me yet," Dr. Masterson said with a little smile.

"I couldn't begin to thank you enough," Mark said.

"Well, we'll see," Dr. Masterson said. He ran a hand through his white hair, and looked out at the shining bend of the East river. And now he wasn't smiling. "You'll be working with a lot of temperamental big-shots from all over the world," he said. "That won't be fun. And there'll be the politicians, newspapermen, things like that." He shook his head. "Don't thank me yet."

"But I'm a doctor," Mark said. "Politics and the press don't concern me."

"I don't know," Dr. Masterson said slowly. "This is a very significant development. Anybody close to that child is going to become a world-famous figure. You understand that, don't you?"

"I hadn't thought of it, sir."

Dr. Masterson smiled. "Frankly, that's why I picked you. Because I knew you would give me that answer. Now go on up to work. They're expecting you." He shook his head, grinning now. "I'm the chief here, but I probably won't see that kid for another ten years. Maybe you're lucky at that. We'll see."

The two men shook hands.

Three hours later, after he had

filled out innumerable forms and talked with representatives from a half-dozen different agencies, Mark was allowed to enter the large, antiseptically clean chamber in which the child from Sirius had been installed. The boy had been given a name by this time, not by any official blessing, but by the newspapers. There had been a dozen attempts to dub him in advance: the Comet kid, the Space Stray, the Void Orphan, Star Baby — all of these had been tried out by eager headline writers. But the name that stuck was one which had a touch of whimsical splendor about it — Little Star. This caught the people's fancy. It acknowledged the almost terrifying fact of his origin, but the diminutive adjective reduced the concept to something that could be assimilated by human minds.

And so he was known as Little Star.

There were a dozen men in the room when Mark entered, scientists, doctors and statesmen, all crowded about the conventional play-pen in which Little Star was sitting.

Mark moved to a point where he could see the boy. He was conscious of the quickened beat of his heart, and of another sensation or feeling which he couldn't define.

Little Star was holding a red rubber ball in his hand when

Mark saw him for the first time. He was about the size of a two-year-old earth child, with thin arms and legs and an alert, curious face. His coloring was a beautiful shade of brown, almost like that of milk chocolate. There was no obvious dissimilarity between him and hundreds of earth babies Mark had examined, except that his fingers were so slim as to be almost non-functional. He seemed neither happy nor sad at the moment as he stared gravely at the red rubber ball in his tiny hand.

Mark came a bit closer and Little Star looked directly at him, and said, "Hello."

"Hello," Mark said awkwardly. His throat felt very dry. He sat down cross-legged on the floor beside the play-pen. No one had told him that the boy spoke English, or any language for that matter, and the fact that he did had jarred him.

"I learned from listening," Little Star said. He put the ball down and came nearer the bars, studying Mark with his lively brown eyes.

"I see," Mark said. "That was clever. My name is Mark. I'm a doctor."

"Is there something the matter with me?"

"No, you look very healthy," Mark said. The boy's tone had been grave, but Mark had a curious feeling that he was being teased. "But I will take care of

you if you need any kind of help," he said. "And I hope we will be friends."

"That is a possibility," Little Star said.

The answer might have been explicit or impudent, Mark couldn't tell. "Is there anything I can do for you now?" he asked.

"No, thank you. But don't be afraid, Mark," Little Star said.

Mark looked sharply at the child. He opened his mouth to deny that he was afraid, but closed it without saying anything. How had the boy known of his fear? That had been his feeling when he entered the room, he realized. But why? Of what was he afraid?

He was almost tempted to ask Little Star these questions. But a greater fear kept him silent. And the greater fear was that Little Star would tell him why he was afraid . . .

That was his first meeting with the boy. In the following year Mark saw him every day and they became friends. Mark learned much about the boy, but he knew that Little Star was learning much more about him. This same thing happened to everyone who came in contact with the child. It didn't bother Mark a bit, since he was a humble man who revered knowledge and felt indebted to those who could lead him to an understanding of all that he

didn't know. But certain eminent persons, were occasionally nettled by the boy's habit of turning their questions about so that they exposed areas of ignorance rather than of knowledge. Little Star was never cute or pretentious in these instances; but it was disconcerting, in any case, for a Nobel Prize winner to be caught short in his speciality by a little child twenty-four inches high.

However, even those whose vanity was offended had to concede that the little boy possessed a marvellous intellect. They put test problems to him and he solved them with only a pencil and paper, destroying hitherto insurmountable obstacles as fast as his thin little fingers could write down the equations. All of this happened during the ten-day-wonder stage when Little Star was more notorious than famous. He was a Ripley item, a freak, something so out of the ordinary that he bewildered rather than impressed the world. This stage gave way to another, of course, when his practical values were realized.

There was no point, the Sirius Authority concluded, to use the boy's mental attainments to answer riddles or to solve test problems. Therefore, the delegates were invited to submit those problems most worrisome to their respective nations, and these in turn would be handed over to

Little Star for examination and, it was hoped, solution.

This was immediately done. China wanted something done about soil conservation, India and Egypt were for weather control to bring water to their millions of parched acres, Russia wanted the horizons of atomic research extended, Great Britain hoped for a method to decrease the size of factories. So it went. Each nation had a pressing need for new techniques and new ideas that would help its people live more abundantly and happily. In fact, every industry from steel to shipping had a little job they wished Little Star would get to work on. And the same was true of medicine, architecture, printing, law, farming — the list seemed endless.

A battle started instantly on priorities. The Sirius Authority was in round-the-clock session trying to muster a majority of votes behind any given proposal. But this seemed hopeless. For the distressing fact appeared that one nation's gain could be another's loss. Horse-trading on an international scale went on for weeks before a coalition got behind one proposal — techniques for weather control — and pushed it through the council.

Then it was given to Little Star, and in two days he gave scientists an overall program to

solve the problem. He created a new science and a new nomenclature in doing this, and it took him twice as long to explain them as it had taken him to complete his theories. Even then the scientists were still in the dark; but they took his word on faith and pushed his ideas into practise.

And they worked, of course.

This first success generated an enormous spirit of optimism throughout the world. Nothing seemed impossible now, nothing too far-fetched. All of mankind's dreams could be realized at last, not five-hundred years in the future, but now, in the blessed now.

There was a cry for speed!

The conquest of disease, poverty, war — this was on the horizon but there was a desperate fear that the victory might not come in time. People wanted their dreams realized now, tomorrow at the latest, for the thought of dying before the millenium arrived was unbearable.

And Little Star did his best.

The Sirius Authority provided him with a laboratory, assistants and the finest of equipment, and asked only in return that he solve the world's problems right away.

Little Star worked long hours at his desk, scribbling out equations that were forged into lances to thrust at the heart of man's deadliest enemies.

Mark worried about his health,

but the boy showed no ill effects from his heavy burdens. One night, after an unusually strenuous day, Mark stopped in and found him at a window, looking down at the boats steaming slowly up the East river. It was a beautiful scene that stretched out before them; the river, the stars, the graceful steel tracery of the bridges, were composed in graceful, lovely patterns.

"Would you like to go for a boat ride sometime?" Mark asked him.

"I'm quite happy," Little Star said, smiling.

"That isn't what I asked."

"Yes it was," Little Star said.

"And you're sure you're happy?"

"Yes, so long as I am useful," Little Star said.

Mark was to remember this later.

But for all his work, Little Star had another side to him. He had a lively sense of humor and loved to play tricks on his nurses. There was nothing malicious in his pranks, but he nearly drove them to distraction by predicting with staggering accuracy what would happen in their love affairs. One young woman in particular, a slim and pretty blonde named Miss Nelson, usually began blushing if he so much as asked her (in his innocent manner) if she'd had a good time the night before. Then, if she let her guard down,

he would tell her exactly what would happen on her next date with whatever young man she was interested in at the moment.

"You will have a little quarrel over a box of popcorn, and he will kiss you ten minutes later," he might say, nodding his head solemnly.

And that, inevitably, would happen.

Once Mark asked him how he did this, and Little Star smiled and said, "I just guess, that's all."

"No, seriously."

"I examine the possibilities," Little Star said. "My advantage is that I can examine a great number of them in a very short time."

"That doesn't tell me much."

"Well, think a moment. Something must happen, isn't that evident? And there are only a certain number of things which can happen. If you look at everything that could happen, you'll see that one of them has what you might call a probability edge."

"But *millions* of things might happen," Mark said.

"Or billions," Little Star said. "The trick is to examine them all, and not take too much time about it." Then he looked up at Mark smiling, and said, "No, I don't think you're a monkey."

"How did you know I was thinking that?"

"I've told you," Little Star said. "It was a probability, and

the best one. You were thinking of us, and trying to decide on an analogy to represent our relationship. You thought of me as an intelligent little earth boy, and yourself as a monkey. Now, if we were both in a cage, and could communicate, the boy could astound the monkey with his predictions. Supposing the door of the cage were ajar. The boy might say to the monkey, 'Today you will eat a banana from that tree outside.' This would baffle the monkey. But all the boy saw was the probability that the monkey would discover the open door, go outside and eat a banana."

"Well, that's what I was thinking," Mark said, grinning slightly. "But I've thought the same thing about the scientists you work with."

"Yes, I see more possibilities than they do," Little Star said simply.

"Okay, I see a particular one staring me right in the face now, and you'd better see it too," Mark said, standing.

Little Star grinned. "Unless I get to bed this minute . . ."

"That's it."

"All right," the child said, climbing onto his bed. "But would it interest you to know that the girl you marry will want —"

"No, it wouldn't!" Mark said hastily. "Get to sleep now."

He walked away from the boy's

room, shaking his head. It wasn't until a few moments later that he began to laugh.

In the months that followed Mark devoted himself completely to the job of preparing a clinical report on the boy's physical reactions. Because of this involvement which shut him off from his normal interests, he was unprepared for an incident which occurred during one of the infrequent occasions when he was dining out with friends.

The conversation had turned to Little Star and one of the group — a man Mark had long respected — said bitterly, "It would have been better if we'd tossed him into the ocean when he came here."

"What in hell do you mean by that?" Mark said angrily.

"Well, he's dangerous, that's what I mean."

"I can't believe you're serious."

The man hesitated, then shrugged. "Well, you've been exposed to him for quite a while, of course."

"What difference does that make?"

"You don't see the situation clearly, perhaps. But I'd advise you to look around you and read the newspapers. That might give you a fresh perspective." . . .

Mark tried to forget the incident, but it clung to him like some harbinger of disaster. And

he was appalled to discover — in papers, magazines and TV — a swiftly burgeoning reaction against Little Star.

There were no explicit charges. However, it was apparent that two forces were at work: the first were those interests who had been hurt by the child's teachings, and the second was the vast amorphous masses of everyday people who feared him because he was different from them, because he was strange and unknown.

The first group, the interests, were almost pathetic, Mark thought. They had asked, no, begged for help, and now they complained because they had got it. Their reactions was highly human and understandable. The labor unions wanted shorter hours — but they wondered fearfully if these technical improvements might put them out of work altogether. The steel companies wanted faster means to produce their product — but they didn't want a product so cheap and functional that it would sell for next to nothing and last forever. Even the doctors were apprehensive. Certainly they desired the conquest of disease — they had fought to this end for centuries — but if it were wiped out overnight, wouldn't it wipe them out too? And the hospitals, nurses, laboratories — what would happen to them?

And nations found the future

frightening too. It was one thing to be given something for themselves, but national policy demanded that they look sceptically at similar boons to other nations.

India was growing more wheat now than ever before in her history, and the time would come when she would move her surpluses onto the world market — and what a mess that would be, said the traditional sellers of wheat. And Russia was performing miracles in the development of atomic equipment — but was it all for peaceful ends? Great Britain, for one, flatly doubted it. German shipping was spreading all over the world, and no one liked that but the Germans.

And the people, sensing the fear of their leaders, became fearful too.

The London Times took a cautious view of these recent discoveries of Little Star. "The happiest progress is that characterized by stateliness and dignity," it intoned. "But can this pell-mell flight on which we are presently borne take us anywhere?"

No one seemed to know!

And meanwhile, unaware of the fuss, or perhaps indifferent to it, Little Star continued to push back the frontiers of knowledge. He attacked the problems of old age, he provided answers to the riddles inherent in telepathy and intuition, he designed Rocket.

Finally, the Sirius Authority

was called into special session to decide how they might control this flood of blessings. The debate raged for days. Russia had a charming suggestion, which was that Little Star be turned over to their custody.

"We will distribute his inventions according to the policies of the People's Republic," their delegate announced. "Who can question the fairness of this?"

Quite a few delegates did, and made themselves clear at the tops of their lungs.

Finally a decision was reached. It was attacked violently by many scientists and teachers, but the Sirius Authority stuck to its guns.

The decision stood.

And the decision was that Little Star would no longer be allowed to continue his experiments. His laboratory would be dismantled, his assistants discharged, and security measures established to prevent his disseminating any information to anyone.

It wasn't solitary confinement they advocated, but it wasn't far from it.

And the world breathed easier!

Mark saw the boy on only two occasions after the verdict was issued. The first time was two weeks after he had been moved out of his laboratory and transferred to a small, comfortable room which was guarded twenty-four hours a day.

Mark found the boy at the window looking down at the river. They stood together a moment and then the child looked up at him and smiled faintly. "No, I'm not happy," he said.

"I know that," Mark said.

Little Star sighed gently. "Why didn't they use the things I gave them?" he said.

Mark was silent.

"Perhaps it isn't time yet," Little Star said.

"I hope that's it," Mark said.

And then he left the boy standing in the dark room staring down on the river.

A month after this he saw a headline which attracted his attention. It read, SIRIUS AUTHORITY RE-CONVENES! He bought the paper and turned into a restaurant for dinner. But the story under the headline destroyed his appetite. It seemed that the world was still far from normal. Locking up Little Star hadn't turned the trick. But the conclusions drawn from this brought a cold lump of fear to Mark's stomach. And he knew then that this was what he had feared the first time he had entered the boy's presence. Now there was a powerful movement underway to have Little Star done away with. It wasn't his ideas, the leaders of this movement said, it was his person — alien, evil and monstrous — that must be destroyed. This

was a lunatic group, true enough, led by hysterics, idiots, and plain damn fools. But the sentiment might grow. Here was an ideal target to shoot at, to blame for all ills, international or personal. Here was a perfect victim.

Mark pushed his food away and walked out of the restaurant. The night was dark and starless, and the feel of winter was there.

A nurse said hello to him, and stopped a second to talk.

"Get that one," she said, nodding to a young Puerto Rican girl who sat alone on a bench, her flat, unintelligent face softened by despair. The girl was about twenty, with warm, melting brown eyes. She was neatly but poorly dressed, and she raised her head hopefully each time the double doors leading to the wards swung open or shut.

"What's she waiting for?" Mark asked, his eyes on the girl.

"She brought her son in about two weeks ago," the nurse said. "He'd been hit by a car, fractured his leg. Well, there were complications and he died. But we can't sell her that. She's a little out of her head, if you ask me. She keeps coming back for her kid. She brought him here, and she's going to wait until he shows up."

"I see," Mark said slowly, "And her son's been buried?"

"Sure. Excuse me, I've got to rush. See you."

Mark hesitated a moment or

so, thinking of nothing at all. Or rather he wasn't conscious of thinking. Then he went to the girl and touched her shoulder. "Please come with me," he said.

"You 'ave my boy?" she said, looking up at him with animal hope in her eyes.

"Please come with me," he said.

She rose and accompanied him and he led her through the building to a side exit.

"Wait here, please," he said.

Mark took the self-service elevator up to Little Star's floor. The child was standing in the middle of his room, facing the door, when Mark came in.

"I am ready," he said softly.

"The guard," Mark said.

"I sent him away," Little Star said. "I told him that I was ill and he had gone for the doctor."

"All right, let's go."

They went downstairs in the elevator and joined the Puerto Rican girl. She began to sob and reached for Little Star, but Mark led them outside into the darkness. Then she picked the boy up and hugged him fiercely.

"You go home now," Mark told her.

"Yes, I go. I 'ave my son."

"Goodby, Little Star."

"Goodbye."

He stared after them, straining his eyes until they were at last surrounded by darkness, and then he turned and walked away.

# THE PERFECT WOMAN

BY ROBERT SHECKLEY

*Somebody once came up with a song title we have never forgotten: "For every man there is a woman, so why did I get stuck with you?"*

*Not that Mr. Morcheck felt that way about Myra. He not only believed she was absolutely perfect; you could get a punch in the nose for doubting it!*

*And he was so right — for a while!*

Mr. MORCHECK awoke with a sour taste in his mouth and a laugh ringing in his ears. It was George Owen-Clark's laugh, the last thing he remembered from the Triad-Morgan party. And what a party it had been! All Earth had been celebrating the turn of the century. The year Three Thousand! Peace and prosperity to all, and happy life. . . .

"How happy is your life?" Owen-Clark had asked, grinning slyly, more than a little drunk. "I mean, how is life with your sweet wife?"

That had been unpleasant. Ev-

eryone knew that Owen-Clark was a Primitivist, but what right had he to rub people's noses in it? Just because he had married a Primitive Woman. . . .

"I love my wife," Morcheck had said stoutly. "And she's a hell of a lot nicer and more responsive than that bundle of neuroses you call *your* wife."

But of course, you can't get under the thick hide of a Primitivist. Primitivists love the faults in their women as much as their virtues — more, perhaps. Owen-Clark had grinned ever more slyly, and said, "You know, Mor-

check old man, I think your wife needs a checkup. Have you noticed her reflexes lately?"

Insufferable idiot! Mr. Morcheck eased himself out of bed, blinking at the bright morning sun which hid behind his curtains. Myra's reflexes — the hell of it was, there was a germ of truth in what Owen-Clark had said. Of late, Myra had seemed rather — out of sorts.

"Myra!" Morcheck called. "Is my coffee ready?" There was a pause. Then her voice floated brightly upstairs. "In a minute!"

Morcheck slid into a pair of slacks, still blinking sleepily. Thank Stat the next three days were celebration-points. He'd need all of them just to get over last night's party.

Downstairs, Myra was bustling around, pouring coffee, folding napkins, pulling out his chair for him. He sat down, and she kissed him on his bald spot. He liked being kissed on his bald spot.

"How's my little wife this morning?" he asked.

"Wonderful, darling," she said after a little pause. "I made Sefiners for you this morning. You like Sefiners."

Morcheck bit into one, done to a turn, and sipped his coffee.

"How do you feel this morning?" he asked her.

Myra buttered a piece of toast for him, then said, "Wonderful darling. You know, it was a per-

factly wonderful party last night. I loved every moment of it."

"I got a little bit veery," Morcheck said with a wry grin.

"I love you when you're veery," Myra said. "You talk like an angel — like a very clever angel, I mean. I could listen to you forever." She buttered another piece of toast for him.

Mr. Morcheck beamed on her like a benignant sun, then frowned. He put down his Sefiner and scratched his cheek. "You know," he said, "I had a little ruck-in with Owen-Clark. He was talking about Primitive Women."

Myra buttered a fifth piece of toast for him without answering, adding it to the growing pile. She started to reach for a sixth, but he touched her hand lightly. She bent forward and kissed him on the nose.

"Primitive Women!" she scoffed. "Those neurotic creatures! Aren't you happier with me, dear? I may be Modern—but no Primitive Woman could love you the way I do — and I adore you!"

What she said was true. Man had never, in all recorded history, been able to live happily with unreconstructed Primitive Woman. The egoistic, spoiled creatures demanded a lifetime of care and attention. It was notorious that Owen-Clark's wife made him dry the dishes. And the fool put up

with it! Primitive Women were forever asking for money with which to buy clothes and trinkets, demanding breakfast in bed, dashing off to bridge games, talking for hours on the telephone, and Stat knows what else. They tried to take over men's jobs. Ultimately, they proved their equality.

Some idiots like Owen-Clark insisted on their excellence.

Under his wife's enveloping love, Mr. Morcheck felt his hang-over seep slowly away. Myra wasn't eating. He knew that she had eaten earlier, so that she could give her full attention to feeding him. It was little things

like that that made all the difference.

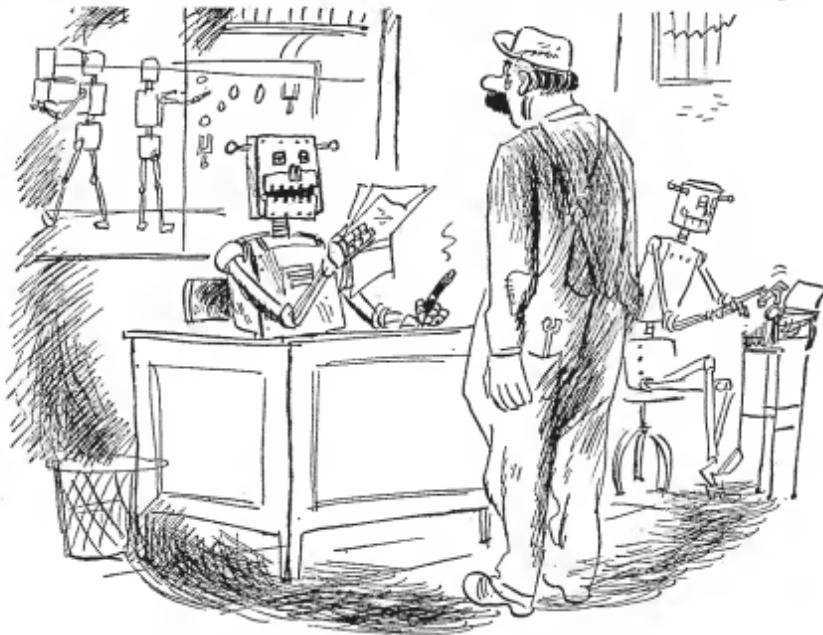
"He said your reaction time had slowed down."

"He did?" Myra asked, after a pause. "Those Primitives think they know everything."

It was the right answer, but it had taken too long. Mr. Morcheck asked his wife a few more questions, observing her reaction time by the second hand on the kitchen clock. She *was* slowing up!

"Did the mail come?" he asked her quickly. "Did anyone call? Will I be late for work?"

After three seconds she opened her mouth, then closed it again.



"I'm afraid the job takes on iron constitution, Hornsley."

Something was terribly wrong.

"I love you," she said simply.

Mr. Morcheck felt his heart pound against his ribs. He loved her! Madly, passionately! But that disgusting Owen-Clark had been right. She needed a checkup. Myra seemed to sense his thought. She rallied perceptibly, and said, "All I want is your happiness, dear. I think I'm sick . . . Will you have me cured? Will you take me back after I'm cured — and not let them change me — I wouldn't want to be changed!" Her bright head sank on her arms. She cried — noiselessly, so as not to disturb him.

"It'll just be a checkup, darling," Morcheck said, trying to hold back his own tears. But he knew — as well as she knew — that she was really sick.

It was so unfair, he thought. Primitive Woman, with her coarse mental fibre, was almost immune to such ailments. But delicate Modern Woman, with her finely balanced sensibilities, was all too prone. So monstrously unfair! Because Modern Woman contained all the finest, dearest qualities of femininity.

Except stamina.

Myra rallied again. She raised herself to her feet with an effort. She was very beautiful. Her sickness had put a high color in her cheeks, and the morning sun highlighted her hair.

"My darling," she said. "Won't you let me stay a little longer? I may recover by myself." But her eyes were fast becoming unfocused.

"Darling . . ." She caught herself quickly, holding on to an edge of the table. "When you have a new wife — try to remember how much I loved you." She sat down, her face blank.

"I'll get the car," Morcheck murmured, and hurried away. Any longer and he would have broken down himself.

Walking to the garage he felt numb, tired, broken. Myra — gone! And modern science, for all its great achievements, unable to help.

He reached the garage and said, "All right, back out." Smoothly his car backed out and stopped beside him.

"Anything wrong, boss?" his car asked. "You look worried. Still got a hangover?"

"No — it's Myra. She's sick."

The car was silent for a moment. Then it said softly, "I'm very sorry, Mr. Morcheck. I wish there were something I could do."

"Thank you," Morcheck said, glad to have a friend at this hour. "I'm afraid there's nothing anyone can do."

The car backed to the door and Morcheck helped Myra inside. Gently the car started.

It maintained a delicate silence on the way back to the factory.

# THE MAN NEXT DOOR

BY BRUCE ELLIOTT

*Papa's in the study, involved in giving birth;  
Junior's in the basement, blowing up the Earth;  
Mama's in the bedroom, making up her face,  
While the guy next door saves the human race.*

BENNET BARLAY sat in front of his typewriter and gazed with anguished eyes at the white paper on the roller. He had a work block. The longer he sat and looked at the blank paper, the less he seemed to be able to think of a story idea. For a tremendous word producer, this was an impossible thing to have happen. Here he had written, and what was more important, sold millions of words to the pulp science-fiction market. His name, or rather his many names, since his production was so high that he was forced to use pseudonyms, was a household word to those peculiar people who called themselves fans, an ugly neologism that had caused him to dislike all science-fiction fans, and yet . . .

And yet, he could not force his weary brain to conjure up a single story idea.

Perhaps, he thought, looking

dually at the calendar, not really seeing the date, March 14, 1953; perhaps he was written out. It had happened to other writers he knew.

Or maybe, he hoped, the work block was brought on by the desperate need he had to raise some money to pay his income tax.

Leaning forward, his two middle fingers and thumb became busy at the keys of the typewriter. The sound of the machine rapped out through the quiet room.

Down in the cellar, Bennet Barlay junior heard the rat-tat-tat of his father's typewriter, but it was so usual a sound that he paid no attention to it. It was part of his conditioning, just as his father's type of writing had practically forced him to be interested in science. The gadget he was working on looked like one of the



*Illustrator: Ray Houlahan*

peculiar illustrations for any of his father's stories.

Wires, oddly angled braces, lights that seemed to flick on and off for no particular reason, a pulsing sound that was on the off beat to the sound of his father's tap-tapping, all combined to make the machine the boy was working on seem like the product of some unearthly science.

Pressing a particular sequence of buttons, the boy's face became drawn with adult strain as he waited. He had kept his research a secret from his father because he wanted to surprise him. But if this worked. . . .

Walking away from the machine, the boy opened a hutch. From it he took a hamster. The tiny animal seemed more like a Disney drawing than a real mammal. It looked up at him with its round, brown eyes, its pathetic stub of useless tail frozen into immobility.

The boy placed the animal on a platform that was an integral part of the apparatus on which he was working. Biting his lower lip, the boy pressed the last button.

Then he waited. . . .

Two floors above ground level the sound of the typewriter was so muted as to be almost inaudible. Mrs. Barlay, standing in front of a three-fold mirror on her vanity table, considered herself and her body. She was pleased with it.

Naked, fresh from the shower, she felt a glow of happiness that bearing her son had left so little sign on her young body. Her face needed makeup before it would match the body which it surmounted. After all, she thought, Benjamin Franklin had been right when he had recommended an older woman for a mistress. The vital fluids *did* descend very slowly, aging first the face, then more slowly, the rest of the woman.

Franklin, she thought, had been so right when he had listed all the advantages of older women, particularly the last sentence he had written for a younger friend's amorous guidance. "Besides," the American Ambassador to France during the Revolution had said, "they (older women) are so grateful . . . ."

Gratitude was only one of the emotions she felt for her next door neighbor. With her fortieth birthday only weeks away, she had been feeling just a trifle sorry for herself. Her connubial relations had slid into a once-a-week affair as automatic as eating. But all the glamour and romance had gone . . . . so many years ago. Until the new man had moved in next door, she had resigned herself to the imminence of her menopause. She had felt and acted like a middle-aged woman, with all love long behind her.

And then, running her hands

over her naked body, she preened herself for her own regard, admiring her multiple reflection in the full length mirrors, and then he had come. Striking looking as a matinee idol, avaricious, eating her up with his eyes, wooing her with his silences as much as with his words. She hoped dispassionately that she had not been too much of a pushover — for like an over-ripe apple, she had fallen from the tree of rectitude at the first touch. Not regretting it, she wondered a little at herself, for in so many ways she had considered that kind of thing revolting. She had never had any difficulty in rejecting any other of the ten or twelve men she had had woo her since her marriage. Of course, most of them had been messy, and their passes had been made at the end of drunken parties . . . but even so, no one's touch had ever so moved her.

Then too, he was odd. Very odd, so unlike anyone else she had ever known. Underneath the passion which he had for her there was something else, a goal he seemed to have, one that she could not understand.

He was, it seemed to her, as she wriggled into her brassiere, much more interested in her son, than the boy's father was.

Why?

But even if the question was never answered, she was full to overflowing with gratitude to the

man who had made her young and desirable again. Her blood pounded as she prepared to meet him.

The man who had worked this miracle in the mind of a woman approaching middle-age did not look like a lover preparing for an assignation. He was peering through the tightly drawn curtains of the window in his house which faced out on his neighbor's domain. He could not hear the clatter of the typewriter, but he could see Barlay frantically tapping at the machine.

Looking away from the writer, the man glanced down at his wrist watch. It was peculiar. Divisions, much too many of them, divided the face of the watch into myriad sections. A sweep hand, one of six, raced around the dial. The man watched it, and waited, sweat pouring from his almost too high brow. Runnels of perspiration ran down from the widow's peak of his hair line. He brushed the back of his hand across his eyes, clearing them.

So soon!

His heart jumped.

From his window, he could see into the other house. The door behind the writer was opening. Now the boy, Bennet junior, was entering his father's sanctum sanctorum.

So much depended on the next few minutes . . . so very much.

In the room that was dedicated

to writing, Barlay almost leaped over the desk when he heard his son's voice.

"Dad . . . I . . ."

Turning around in his chair, Barlay snapped, "How many times do I have to tell you, never, never, come in here when I'm working?"

The boy retreated a little at the anger in his father's voice.

"I know, Dad — I wouldn't have come in — but I think you should know . . ."

"Know what?" The father shook his head. "No, don't tell me! Get out. Get out and leave me alone . . ."

The boy tried once more to open his mouth, but when his father saw this, the man half rose from the chair. "Out!" Fury spilled from him.

The boy left.

Bennet Barlay sat and looked at the paper in front of him which no longer was white. Type covered it. However, the words were repetitious. All they said over and over again, was "Now is the time for all good men to come to the aid of the party." Sometimes when Barlay was stuck badly, just the mechanics of typing would get his brain working again. It had not helped this time. This was a real block.

Not a shred of a plot idea, not an iota of a story line had occurred to him. As the door closed behind him, and his son left the

room, he began again to try and force his tired brain to work.

Time travel? Done to death. A fourth dimension story? How to make the most cornball of science-fiction ideas palatable? He had pulled so many switches on time travel and the fourth dimension. . . . One more?

Scowling with concentration, he put another piece of paper in the typewriter. Was it possible to squeeze just one more story from these hackneyed elements? He needed a story so badly.

Across the lawn that separated the two houses, the man who was watching let the pent up breath out of his lungs. One crisis was safely past . . .

The boy had tried to tell his father about the success of his experiment and had been rejected.

Next . . .

From his vantage point he could see into the mother's room. She was dressed now, at least the top half of her which he could see. His hand went to the phone that rested on a table near him.

He could see her turn as at a sudden sound.

In her room, Mrs. Barlay was putting the last touches on her makeup. Now her face seemed to match the youthfulness of her body. "Come in," she called in response to the light tap on the door.

Her son came into the room. His lower lip trembled a trifle. "Mommy . . . I tried to tell dad, but he got mad because I interrupted him when he was working."

"Yes, dear?" She was not really very interested. Until her affair with the next door neighbor the boy had been almost the whole of her life. Now . . . he was just an interruption, someone to be gotten rid of as gently as possible.

"You know how long I've been working down in the cellar on my idea."

She was paying him very little attention, a wisp sticking out from the bottom of her coiffure had caught her eye in the mirror. She busied herself in trapping it and making it join the shining helmet of her hair. "Yes, dear?"

"Well . . . Mummy . . ." The twelve-year-old boy ran to his mother, threw his arms around her and said, "It worked . . . it worked!"

"What worked, dear?" She still was only paying half a mind to his childish prattle.

Across the way, in that other house, the man dialled the phone frantically.

The boy said, "I put a hamster in it . . . and . . ."

The shrill ringing of the phone interrupted him.

His mother held up her hand for silence and said, "Yes?"

The man on the other end of the

phone said, "My darling, dearest, I cannot wait till tonight! Somehow you must come to me now. Never have I wanted you so desperately . . ."

Holding her hand over the mouth piece of the phone the mother said, "Run along, dear. You can tell me all about your little experiment tonight at dinner."

Shoulders sagging, the youngster left the room.

As soon as the door closed, the woman pitched her voice low and almost whispered, "But, darling, is it safe? In the day time . . ."

He said almost angrily, "Why do you fear love? Come to my house, now this instant — I beseech you!"

She said, "He . . . he's working . . . maybe I can . . . I'll say I went into town to buy something . . ."

"Good. I'll be waiting, my very dearest," the man lied. He hung up the phone. More sweat was beading up on his forehead. Now he must get into her house, sneak in, get down to the cellar — and supply the little boy with the listening ear he so desperately needed.

He went to the back door of his suburban house; which was extraordinary to him since he had never seen one before except in pictures, until the day he had arrived, unheralded in the one house that was near his objective.

The woman called through the closed door, raising her voice to make it heard above the clatter of the typewriter keys, "Bennet, I'm going in to town . . . be back soon . . . dinner . . ."

He mumbled something that could have been anything.

He stared reproachfully at the new sheet of paper which was also covered with "Now is the time . . ."

She left the house, looking around, making sure that neither her son nor her husband could see that the route she was taking would curve around and back to that of the next door neighbor — the only bachelor in all that suburban area.

In the cellar the boy looked at his machine. It had worked . . . and no one was interested, no one was willing to listen.

From the top of the stairs he heard a voice. It was warm, friendly, it expressed interest. The man at the head of the stairs asked, "How's it coming, laddy?"

Mr. Gardner, as he had chosen to call himself in this particular time continuum, descended the stairs. He smiled at the boy.

"Gee . . . Mr. Gardner, you know the idea I had?"

The man nodded. How well he knew. How important the boy's idea had bulked in the time that came after. . . . He knew.

"Well," shyly, but bursting

with pride, the boy said, "It worked, sir. It worked. I put a hamster in it — and it disappeared!"

The man walked to the machine. Such a silly looking object, a boy's plaything, and yet . . .

"Have you tried to bring the hamster back?"

The boy gulped. "I — I'm a little afraid to. I was hoping dad, or mommy would come down here with me when I pressed the last button. You see, all the time I've been working on my invention, I never really thought it'd work. It was a kind of hobby . . . like when I was a young kid, and played with my erector set."

A child's toy, Mr. Gardner thought, and what a result it had had! As though it was yesterday instead of three hundred years in the future, he remembered the amazement that he and his confreres had felt when the tiny hamster had appeared in the middle of the conference table.

Consternation was the mildest word that fitted what they felt.

An aperture in time, a fourth dimensional device which allowed travel through the unresounding corridors of time. In his time it had been believed that the device had been invented by one of his contemporaries. They had just begun, he and his fellow workers, to explore the possibilities of the machine. And then, right in the middle of their plans, the hamster

had arrived, throwing everything into confusion.

Someone had been needed to go back through time, nip this thing in the bud, prevent its too early application. He had volunteered, much to his own disgust, because he had felt the gesture was a little too romantic, too heroic, the kind of thing he had hoped he had outgrown.

But here he was involved in a series of shabby stratagems, making love to the boy's mother, interfering with the boy's father's mental processes, all to the end that it would be he, and not they whom the boy would show the device and how it acted.

His plans had worked but that did not prevent him from having guilty feelings about what he had done. He hoped the shame would wear away, when he was successful and again back in his own time.

"If you're a little afraid," he said, measuring his words carefully, "and I can't blame you if you are, I'll try the gadget for you . . ."

The boy felt reassurance flow from the man to him. He smiled and said, "Golly, — would you?"

He showed the man the simple series of operations that he thought would reverse the action and return the hamster to its own time.

In the neighboring house, the woman was distraught. Why the sudden call from the man? Why

had she come here? What had possessed her to risk fouling her own nest? Had she been insane? She loved her husband very dearly, the years they had shared were precious ones — and she had risked all that for a cheap flirtation and momentary gratification . . .

Pressing her knuckles into her forehead, she thought of the way her husband worked, the way he chained himself to his typewriter, hurting himself, working when he was tired, forcing himself to think when his brain was exhausted, and for what? Just to care for her and their son . . .

The thought of the boy made her flush. He had tried to tell her something and she had been so full of "love"—of lust that she had rejected him!

Alone in the empty house she considered her actions and was revolted by them. They would never know, and her love would have to make up to them for what she had done.

She left the house, never to return to it. But a strange thing happened as she walked across the lawn. Full to overflowing with what she now thought of rather mediievally as her sin, she felt her emotions go through some odd kind of change as she neared her own house.

In the cellar, the man who called himself Gardner, said, "I

just press these buttons and that's all there is to it, eh?"

The boy nodded, his eyes glued to the frame of the device. If he was right, the hamster should appear on the platform as though by magic.

He watched as the man pressed the penultimate button. Next . . .

Mr. Gardner vanished and with him went the machine. In the hutch nearby, the little hamster nibbled on a lettuce leaf, its tiny pouches, from which it got its name, full to bursting.

On the lawn, Mrs. Barlay paused, trying to remember what she had just been thinking, a vagrant shred of a thought, gone, forever. She looked about her, eyed the privet hedges. Bennet would have to get to work on them as soon as he took a breather from his writing. A warm feeling of fulfillment made her glad to be alive, love for her husband and her son made her grateful for her womanhood. She was happy that she had never had any other lover but her husband; sometimes, almost wistfully, she had thought it would be nice to know another man, but now in the full glow of the sun, with the sweet smell of

the cut grass coming up to her nostrils, she knew that this, her way, was best.

In the cellar, young Barlay, mind idle, wondered what to do with himself. He had come down to the cellar for some reason which he had forgotten. To play with his old trains? No . . . His erector set, now rusty from disuse? No. Now he had it. He wanted to make a model plane.

Getting out some balso wood he went happily to work whistling as he carved out a fuselage.

In the room with the typewriter, the man facing the machine smiled suddenly. An idea had come to him finally. Good old brain, it always came through in a pinch. He had thought of a twist.

Tearing out the type-covered paper with its foolish repetitive "now is the time," he crumpled up the paper and threw it in the overflowing trash basket.

He typed "THE MAN NEXT DOOR" halfway down the white page. Then rapidly, as fast as his fingers could move, he wrote, "Bennet Barlay sat in front of his typewriter and gazed with anguished eyes at the white paper on the roller. He had a work block."

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